

A Comparative Analysis of Gender and Public Opinion on Democracy in Poland, Romania, and the United States, 1995-2020

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Abstract

Research on attitudes toward democracy in Poland and Romania is timely given 2019's three-decade anniversary of freedom from communism in Central and Eastern Europe. The U.S. makes an interesting comparison case given its history involving the American Dream and the Dream's essential component of democracy. Using the World Values Surveys and a conceptual framework linking gender and democracy attitudes, we examine beliefs about democracy in Poland, Romania, and the U.S. between 1995 and 2020. Findings show significant cross-country, cross-time, and cross-gender variation on most of the belief measures and, contrary to much previous research, Americans do not always provide the strongest support for democracy. We conclude that simple assumptions about American exceptionalism on democracy attitudes are often inaccurate, as are assumptions that women are universally more positive about democracy than men. Consensus on democracy related attitudes in Romania and Poland is also not supported by our results, suggesting that unique historical, political, and socio-economic experiences among formerly communist nations play an important role in shaping beliefs about democracy.

Keywords: public opinion, gender, democracy, freedom, liberty, Poland, Romania, U.S.

1. Introduction

The American Dream is a key component of American culture and history. The Dream includes values of freedom, democracy, equality of opportunity, and individual rights (Hanson & White, 2011). Although belief in the Dream arguably makes America somewhat exceptional, it is not unusual for other nations to also have a Dream. Countries which have had recent struggles for democracy may be especially likely to value the ideals of democracy. This paper examines Poles, Romanians, and Americans on their respective attitudes toward democracy and the related concepts of freedom and liberty.¹

Attitudes toward democracy are important since citizen support for democracy is necessary for a healthy, stable democracy to endure (Lechler & Sunde, 2019). Anti-democratic attitudes, on the other hand, place democracies at risk (De Witte, 2022). Thus, studying public opinion on democracy is particularly salient in relatively newly formed democracies (as in Central and Eastern Europe) since these opinions can be dynamic factors influencing the direction of new governments and the legitimacy of fledgling democracies (McAllister, 2005; Kwiatkowski, 1992; McIntosh & MacIver, 1992). Research on beliefs about democracy across countries exists, but there has been no specific focus on Poland, Romania, and the U.S. despite several interesting historical and contemporary similarities and differences among them. As we argue below, a comparison of the U.S. with two formerly communist countries that experienced democratic revolutions at approximately the same historical moment will provide insights into the different contexts within which democracy attitudes either flourish or recede. Since prior research has found evidence of changes over time in democracy attitudes, our research incorporates a cross-time as well as a cross-country examination (Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). In addition, some researchers have shown variation by gender on public opinion about democracy, with women sometimes favoring different aspects of democracy than men (e.g., Hanson & Goenaga, 2021).

However, most previous studies have largely ignored the role of gender in shaping democracy attitudes. We integrate gender and public opinion on democracy in an effort to determine whether gender complexities exist.

1.1 Poland and Romania: Democratic Transitions

Our discussion of attitudes toward democracy in the U.S. and two formerly communist Central and Eastern European (hereafter, CEE) countries begins with the divergent paths to democracy experienced by Poland and Romania. Although the revolutionary struggles for freedom in both countries occurred at the same time, the struggle was more violent in Romania. Additionally, the two countries continued to diverge on their experiences with democracy after their revolutions. Many scholars assume a similarity in attitudes toward democracy in CEE nations and a corresponding difference with Western countries, with more supportive democracy attitudes in the West. This argument is based on the West's relatively longer experience with democracy (Toka, 1995, Klingemann et al, 2006; Konieczna-Salamatin, 2021). We argue that divergence in the experiences that led to democracy in Poland and Romania, and their continued divergence in the post revolution years, created unique democracy attitudes.

1.1.1 Poland

The Solidarity movement that ended communism in Poland was part of a larger Velvet, or Gentle, Revolution involving non-violent transitions of power in 1989 in Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Bulgaria, and the former Czechoslovakia (Antohi & Tismaneanu, 2000). Romania was alone among these countries in experiencing a violent overthrow of the communist regime (Tismaneanu, 2009).

The success of the Solidarity movement in Poland can be partially attributed to the support of Pope John Paul II; the championing of human rights by presidents Carter and Reagan as a weapon against totalitarian regimes; Mikhail Gorbachev's supportive role; and Poland's involvement in anticommunist resistance movements (Antohi & Tismaneanu, 2000). Although there was a move toward democracy, free elections, and a market economy after the fall of communism in Poland, the transition was difficult, with high unemployment, corruption of the new ruling class, and slow economic recovery (Light & Phinnemore, 2001). Nevertheless, values shaped under the influence of Western societies began to replace traditional attitudes in Poland. These trends paralleled the construction of a free market and a democratic political system (Marody, 2019).

Poland, like other CEE countries, has witnessed increased support for populist parties over the past decade (Konieczna-Salamatin, 2021; Ingelhart & Norris, 2016). From 2015-2023, many of Poland's democratic and market reforms eroded, diminishing Poland's status as a regional leader in the move toward democratic-liberal institution building. Poland's 2023 parliamentary elections, however, ushered in a movement away from the authoritarian policies of the previous regime.ⁱⁱ

1.1.2 Romania

While Romania broke with communism shortly after Poland did, democracy was not fully realized until years after 1989. As in much of the CEE, Soviet occupiers forced communism upon Romania at the close of WWII. Unlike Poland, Romania was not occupied by Nazi Germany during the war. Rather, Romania's military dictator had allied with the Axis fighting against the USSR. Post-war, the Soviets extracted war reparations from Romania, further destabilizing the economy. By the end of 1947, the Soviet-backed Communist Party controlled the government and all state institutions and agencies. Change began in 1989 when a popular dissident was targeted by the state. The protests and bloody revolution that followed were successful in overthrowing the communist government.

In 1990, Romania held its first free elections in over fifty years. The transitional democracy that followed was headed by prominent former communists, causing many to view the new government as quasi-legitimate (Kelso, 2021). Tismaneanu (2009) described this new government as a hybrid democracy. Over the following two decades, many Romanians became disillusioned with corrupt leaders, resulting in declining participation in elections and plummeting trust in public institutions (Romanian Insider, 2015). However, in 2015 and 2019, country-wide protests brought down two corrupt Social Democratic Party governments, marking the most positive, significant impact on democracy since communism ended.

In sum, the experiences of Poland and Romania before and during communism, in the transition from communism, and in their post-communism experiences diverge in many important ways. Poland is unique for its Solidarity movement and Romania for its violent revolution into democracy following rule by a long-term communist dictator.

1.2 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that guides our research questions and analysis consists of three subframes—American exceptionalism, democracy, and gender. An assumption built into all three of these frameworks is that attitudes toward democracy are not constant but rather are influenced by larger social, economic, cultural, and political changes.

1.2.1 American Exceptionalism

The American Dream has been an integral component of U.S. culture since the Declaration of Independence. Seymour Martin Lipset's (1996) work on American exceptionalism emphasized the values of liberty, democratic egalitarianism, and individualism. However, some scholars have argued that the notion of American exceptionalism is largely a myth (e.g., Walt 2011; Hodgson, 2009; Hauhart & Sardoc, 2021). Many countries are patriotic and view themselves as exceptional. While there may be some unique aspects of the American system, American exceptionalism claims that the U.S. is unique and superior in its values and democracy. Evidence suggests it is not, and that America is like many other countries (Walt, 2011). Walt (2011) suggests the notion of American exceptionalism is dangerous since it involves a self-righteousness that leads to a sense of right, superiority, and power internationally along with a belief that America is destined to spread its unique democracy to other countries. Inequality, uneven access to health care, and other factors lead Hodgson (2009) to state that Americans are blind to their own faults and America is exceptional for its failings and false illusions.

1.2.2 Democracy

There is considerable disagreement in the literature on the meaning of democracy (Mansbridge 1990; Tremblay 2007). This dissensus reflects in part the fact that democracies often coexist with structured gender and race inequality; not all democracies guarantee liberties for minority groups (Miller, 2018). Inglehart (1997) provides one of the few comparative frameworks on democracy and democracy-related issues. He argues that economic and political changes influence cultural changes, and vice versa. With the movement toward post-modernization there comes a strong link between political culture and democracy. The argument is that change in cultural patterns that come with economic development contribute to support of, and more skill on the part of the mass public in achieving, democracy. He sees a trend from modernization toward post-modernization values and provides evidence of the links to political and socioeconomic variables, including democracy. Taylor's (2017) argument that there is a pressure toward democratization across countries in the contemporary world supports Inglehart's work on trajectories of social change. Inglehart finds several coherent clusters of countries which tend to be geographically grouped. His data show the U.S. to be one of the countries with the largest shift toward postmodern values. The countries of CEE are one of the clusters where the culture has not transitioned to postmodern well-being values, including democracy, to the extent of other countries (e.g., U.S. and Scandinavia). The argument for the overall shift toward postmodernism is that change away from economic conditions of scarcity takes place and other factors begin to shape society. Some more recent data (e.g., Inglehart & Welzel, 2006; Budescu & Uslaner, 2003) show that Poland and Romania are not necessarily in the same cluster on democracy issues. Not all recent research agrees on this issue of diversity, however (e.g., Konieczna-Slamatin, 2021). Notably, economic, cultural, and social changes over time have likely contributed to the diversity of findings on variation in attitudes toward democracy across countries. Our framework acknowledges this diversity, taking time and change into account.

A final framework for studying attitudes toward democracy involves differences in the quality and resilience of democracies following non-violent revolutions (like in Poland) as opposed to violent revolutions (like in Romania). The argument is that non-violent revolutions are more likely to lead to democratic consolidation and resiliency. This form of revolution is more likely to lead to a democracy that has a greater chance of surviving, involves a peaceful turnover of power, and exhibits a strong democratic quality (Lambach et al., 2020; Duodet & Pinckney 2021). We thus draw from the work of Lambach et al. (2020) who argue that there are three theoretical assumptions about how successful non-violent transitions take place. They achieve success by 1) leveling the playing field between the various actors in the revolution; 2) advancing a democratic political culture; and 3) limiting the military's political influence. These three conditions contribute, the authors note, to greater odds of a flourishing democracy. It is not the case that all non-violent revolutions create such democracies, however (Pinckney, 2018). Duodet and Pinckney (2021) suggest that inclusive dialogue and negotiation processes are critical for post-transition political institutions to result in successful democracies.

Support for the importance of the nature of transitions over economic factors in creating commitment to democracy is provided in Evans and Whitefield's (1995) examination of transitional societies. Given these theoretical assumptions about mode of transition to democracy, we expect diversity both within Poland and between Poland and Romania on attitudes toward democracy. Specifically, on at least some measures, we anticipate more positive attitudes toward democracy in Poland than in Romania.

The framework on public opinion toward democracy presented above goes beyond much previous work in several ways: by acknowledging multiple dimensions of democracy; by questioning the assumption that the U.S. is the country with the most favorable democracy attitudes; by considering change in public opinion over time; and by acknowledging diversity in CEE countries on these attitudes. What this framework is missing is a consideration of whether men and

women's attitudes differ within and across countries. We turn to this issue next.

1.2.3 Gender, Freedom, Liberty/Rights, and Democracy

Much of the scholarship on democracy and related concepts has been contributed by men. In the past, women were excluded from ideas about and participation in democracy (Tremblay, 2007). Yet, women in Poland, Romania, and the U.S. have historically been involved in freedom movements, often during the same time period. Our research is guided by scholarship on gender and public opinion on democracy. Much research shows gender differences with women, for example, being more likely than men to vote and to favor distinct political parties. Women have also been shown to be more egalitarian than men, and to hold distinct economic and issue preferences (Celis et al., 2013; Abendschon & Steinmetz, 2014; Kaufman, 2006; CAWP, 2015; Tyson, 2018). Few studies have examined these gender differences in a comparative context.

In one cross-cultural study, Hansen & Goenaga (2021) found that women assign less value to democracy issues that prioritize men's power and resources (e.g., political parties and media). On the other hand, they place more value on factors that are less likely to maintain gender inequalities, such as protecting the rights of individuals. Despite these differences in the specific aspects of democracy that men and women most value, Hansen and Goenaga do not find gender differences in overall support of democracy.

Gender effects are not always constant. For instance, women do not show more support for democracy and related concepts than men across time and place. Firebaugh and Sandu (1998) found in post-communist Romania that it was men who favored more democratization, largely due to their lower level of risk aversion. Thus, simple conclusions about women's democratic values ignore the unique cultural and historical experiences of men and women as well as the complexity of the notion of democracy. Inclusion of gender in our research will further refine our understanding of attitudes toward democracy.

2. Material Studied

2.1 Attitudes about Democracy in Poland, Romania, and the United States

Our earlier discussion of the unique histories and experiences of Romanians, Poles, and Americans predict some divergence across these nations in their attitudes about democracy, as Inglehart (1997) and Inglehart and Welzel (2005), among others, have confirmed (Wuttke et al., 2022).

2.1.1 Poland

Following the Solidarity movement, Poland had met the formal criteria for consolidating democracy by 1995 (Taras, 1995) and was considered one of the most successful examples of democratic transition in the region. However, Toka (1995) found that Polish citizens, along with those in a few other CEE countries, showed less support for democracy than did their Western European counterparts. Toka posited that economic dissatisfaction with the transition was a driving factor in lower support for democracy among Poles. Others suggest that during this period democracy was being defined in economic, not political (e.g., justice), terms which also may have had an impact on attitudes toward democracy (McIntoch & MacIver, 1992).

A decade later, Poles were still not enamored with democracy (Matthes, 2016). Public opinion polls indicated that Polish respondents were not optimistic about their democratic institutions, with less than half expressing trust in the counting of votes or in members of electoral commissions (CBOS, 12/2018). Marody (2019) suggested that Poland no longer led the field in democratic-liberal models of political and economic systems. Complexity in the attitudes of Poles is revealed by an increase in pro-democracy sentiment and continual support of liberties while simultaneously demonstrating declining confidence in democratic institutions and in government. Tworzecki (2019) noted a democratic backslide in Poland since the PiS (Law and Justice) party returned to power in 2015.

Some scholars have found more positive democracy attitudes in Poland. Matthes (2016) suggests that even with the 2015 vote, most Poles held democracy in high esteem. Regardless of their critiques of the current democracy, Poles have not shown a shift toward democracy fatigue (Matthes, 2016; Wuttke et al., 2022). Surveys suggest Poles are less politically alienated than residents in other European countries, and that most believe that a democratic government really does matter. (CBOS, 6/2018). Poland continues to be among the top ranked countries on satisfaction with democracy, which has been on the increase over the past decade. In many other European countries satisfaction has been in decline (Pew Research Center, 2019).

2.1.2 Romania

Since 1989, Romania has embarked on a slow path towards democracy. The post-communist government was remiss in following through on promises to make fundamental changes and integrate Romania with European institutions. By the year 2000, Romanians' earlier high expectations were lowered by frustrations and disappointments for their dream of a

democracy (Chiriac, 2001). More than 30 years on, Romanians continue to be disappointed with their democracy and politicians. Over the past three decades, belief in the government has steadily eroded as corruption became a mainstay of post-communist governments.

In a 2020 survey on satisfaction with democracy, just half of Romanians reported that having a liberal democracy with regular elections was better for their country (Globsec 2020:13). Among East European respondents in the same survey on democracy issues, Romanians were the least likely to have trust in democratic institutions (including the Presidency, parliament, and the judiciary) (Globsec, 2020). More than half of Romanians surveyed believed it does not matter who is in power as little will change. For instance, a slight majority of Romanians reported that they would surrender some democratic freedoms - freedom of speech, travel, or association - to have greater security in their country. In 2021, EU data show that the majority of Romanians hold higher levels of trust in the EU, with 56% trusting the EU while less than a third trust their government and parliament, at 31 percent and 29 percent, respectively (Martin-Russu, 2022: 138).

2.1.3 United States

Although the notion of the American Dream and its ideas of freedom and democracy continues to represent a significant portion of American culture (Hanson & White, 2011), surveys reveal a growing number of Americans believe that freedom and rights accrue to people in groups other than their own (ABC News/Washington Post 2016). On the issue of inequality of freedoms and rights, however, a large majority of Americans note inequality in the economy is a “big problem” (Pew Research Center 2017), and a small majority report the government does very little to lower this inequality (Associated Press/NORC 2018).

A 2020 Pew Research poll suggests that the majority of Americans think that significant change is needed on the fundamental structure and design of American government. An earlier 2019 poll conducted by Pew found that Americans largely agree on democratic ideals and values but view the U.S. as falling short of realizing them (Pew, 2020b). A large majority of Americans view elected officials as selfish and dishonest (Pew, 2020b). The Pew poll concludes that Americans express anxiety over misinformation (partly aimed at the media) and increased political polarization over the past few decades.

While the extreme polarization that typifies the current U.S. political landscape is not unique, it has consequences for democracy. Graham and Svulik (2020) find that a majority of Americans have value systems which involve an exchange of democratic principles for political ideologies, partisan loyalty, and policy preferences.

Four questions guide our research:

- 1a. Do Americans have more positive attitudes toward democracy than Romanians and Poles?
- 1b. If so, does this pattern hold for both men and women?
- 2a. Do Romanians and Poles hold similar attitudes toward democracy?
- 2b. If so, does this pattern hold for both men and women?
3. Are women more positive than men toward democracy in each country?
4. Do democracy attitudes change over time in the three countries being examined? If so, in what ways?

3. Method

3.1 Data

We use the World Values Survey (hereafter, WVS) as our data source (Inglehart et al., 2020). WVS is one of the most widely examined cross-national surveys in the social sciences. It has been employed extensively by scholars, policy makers, journalists, and others interested in civil society and democratic institutions (e.g., Inglehart, 1997; Wuttke et al., 2022). Since 1981, the WVS has been administered every five years by an international group of social scientists; more than 120 countries participated in the most recent wave of data collection, Wave 7. The samples are representative of people aged 18 and older who reside in private households in each country, regardless of their nationality, citizenship, or language. Survey questions cover a wide range of values and beliefs, including, most importantly for our purposes, a battery of questions related to various aspects of democracy. See Appendix A for a full description of the measures and coding.

To examine the most recent attitudes toward democracy we use Wave 7 of the WVS, which is the latest available data set.ⁱⁱⁱ Over time changes in attitudes toward democracy are addressed using Waves 3 through 7.^{iv,v} Since neither Poland nor Romania was included in Wave 1, and not all of the questions were included in the surveys for the three countries in Wave 2, we exclude these waves from the analysis. The five remaining waves span the 25-year time period beginning soon after the fall of communism in CEE. The cross-time comparisons are limited to respondents for whom all study

variables were measured in each of the three countries in that year.

3.2 Overview of Analyses

We use ANOVA, multiple classification analysis (MCA), and a post hoc Bonferroni multiple comparison procedure to examine research questions 1a and 2a about differences in means on freedom, liberty, and democracy across the three countries.^{vi} To answer research questions 1b and 2b we use t-tests to contrast the means between men and women within countries.

To address research question 3, we also use results from t-tests comparing men and women within countries. If there is an overall gender effect that holds across countries, then men will be consistently higher or lower on some items and women consistently higher or lower on other items.

To examine our fourth research question involving change over time in the democracy measures, we create line charts. Since not all measures were collected in all waves, we examine variation over time between Wave 2 (1990-94) and Wave 7 (2017-2020) for four critical attitude measures that were available in all (or most) of the waves for each of the three countries. When there are substantial changes in attitudes across waves, we provide insight into the historical context of the period involved.

4. Results

4.1 Country Effects

Results in Table 1 are used to answer research questions 1a and 2a. The table shows means on the measures of freedom, civil liberties, and democracy in Wave 7. Several significant differences exist. With one exception, the U.S. scores significantly higher on each of the freedom questions. The exception is freedom of choice and control, where the U.S. mean is higher than Poland's but not significantly different from the mean for Romania. Romania scores the lowest among the three countries on every measure of freedom except freedom of choice and control.

Table 1. ANOVA (MCA) models with Bonferroni tests for means on freedom, liberty, and democracy attitudes for Poland, Romania, and U.S. (World Values Survey, Wave 7 2017-2020).⁺

Freedom		Poland	Romania	U.S.
	1) Rights			
	Gender:			
	Men's rights jobs	0.74 ^a	0.46 ^a	0.94 ^a
	Immigrants:			
	Jobs priority immigrants	0.18 ^a	0.12 ^a	0.40 ^a
	Human:			
	Respect for human rights	---	2.23 ^c	2.61 ^d
	2) Freedom of			
	Speech	0.17 ^a	0.12 ^a	0.25 ^a
	Choice + Control	7.04 ^a	7.67 ^b	7.74 ^b
	Religion	---	2.71 ^c	3.20 ^a
Civil Liberties				
	People should have more to say on how things are done in the country	0.29 ^a	0.10 ^a	0.22 ^a
	Attended peaceful demonstration	0.12 ^c	0.09 ^c	0.17 ^a
Democracy				
	Democracy: civil rights protect	8.43 ^c	8.41 ^c	7.67 ^c
	Democracy: women same rights men	8.98 ^a	8.19 ^a	8.40 ^a
	Importance of Democracy	9.05 ^a	8.25 ^b	8.28 ^b
	How democratically country run	5.68 ^a	5.38 ^a	6.05 ^a
	Vote in National elections	0.68 ^a	0.58 ^a	0.73 ^a

^a Significantly different from both other countries, $p < .05$; ^b only significantly different from Poland, $p < .05$; ^c only significantly different from U.S., $p < .05$; ^d only significantly different from Romania, $p < .05$.

⁺Sample sizes vary depending on missing values: Poland (1205-1343); Romania (1121-2823); U.S. (1930-2580).

We examine two measures of civil liberties. Poles are the most supportive of the premise that people should have more say in how things are done in the country, followed by Americans and then Romanians. American respondents are more likely to have attended peaceful demonstrations than those in Poland and Romania. Poland and Romania do not differ significantly from each other on this measure.

There are five measures of attitudes toward democracy in Table 1. On three of the items—civil rights, women’s rights, and the importance of democracy—Poles show the most support. Romanians have a similarly high level of support on the democracy/civil rights question. On all other questions Romanians score the lowest on the democracy items. Americans are the most likely to say that their country is being run democratically and to vote in national elections. Our findings do not support exceptional American attitudes toward democracy (research question 1a) since the U.S. is highest on some but not all of the democracy measures. The findings also do not support a similarity in attitudes in Poland and Romania (research question 2a) given the considerable divergence between Poles and Romanians on a majority of the survey questions.

In separate analyses not shown here, we controlled on education, employment status, marital status, age, and sex in order to examine the stability of the country effects when other factors that may influence attitudes are taken into account. Country remains significant in all of the models, and in a majority of cases the pattern among countries remains the same. The only change in pattern occurs on the importance of democracy question, where attitudes held by U.S. respondents are now the lowest among the three countries.

4.2 Cross-time Trends in Country Attitudes

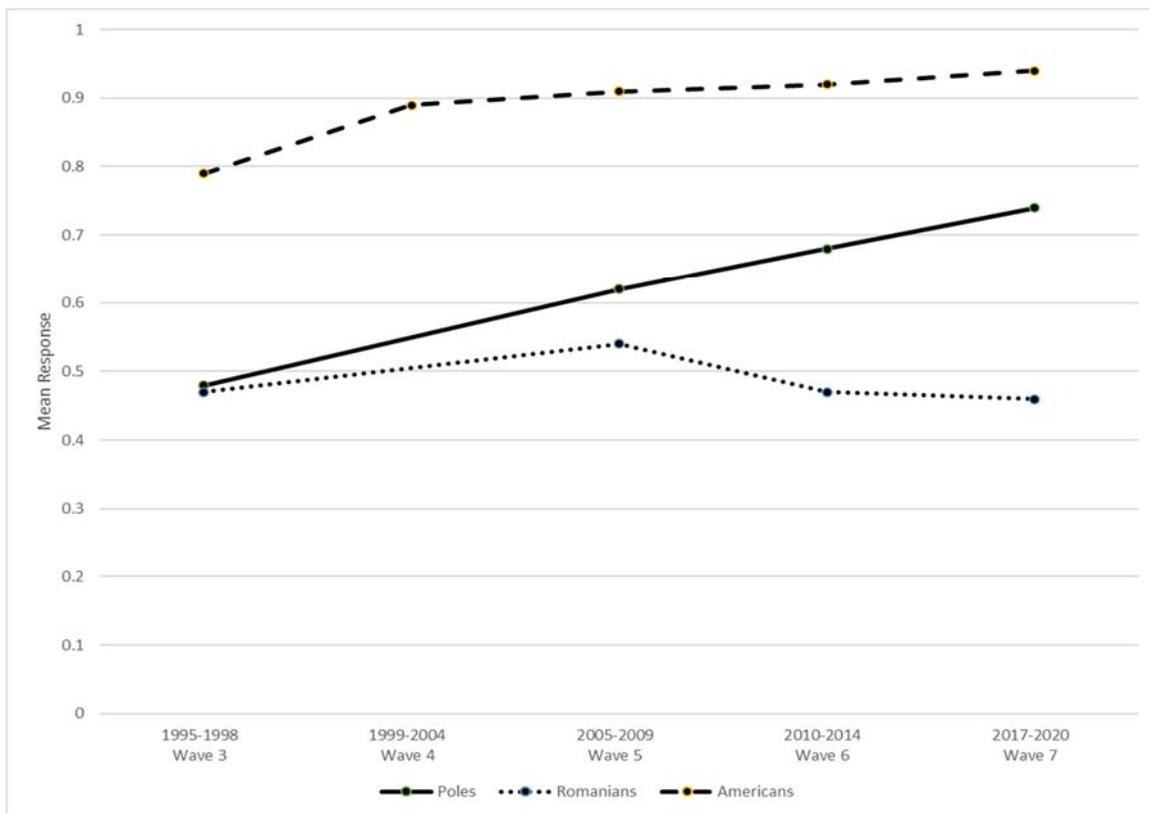


Figure 1. Mean response of Polish, Romanian, and American respondents on jobs and men, World Values Survey

Description: “When jobs are scarce men should have more right to a job than women” (0=Agree, 1=Disagree).

Before examining the gender questions, we address our fourth research question which asks about the over-time stability of the democracy attitudes found in Table 1. We have illustrated trend results for several measures in Figures 1 through 4. Figure 1 shows responses to the question about whether men have more rights to jobs than do women when jobs are scarce. Americans are the most likely, and Romanians the least likely, to disagree with this statement in all survey years. Scores for the U.S. and (especially) Poland have increased over time. Americans showed a large increase in support for women in the labor market between the 3rd and 4th waves. Perhaps this increased support was a response to the 1995 meeting of leaders from 189 nations at the Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing. The leaders adopted the most thorough platform for action on women’s rights and gender equality ever produced. Romanians showed an increase in support for women in the labor market until Wave 4 but their scores decreased to their lowest

value in Wave 7. Perhaps the lowering of support was a backlash against the policy on equal opportunity for men and women established as a national agency in 2005.

Interestingly, the trends in Figure 2 show similar attitudes about the importance of democracy across the three countries in Wave 5 and, to a slightly less degree, in Wave 6. By Wave 7, however, Poles had separated from both Americans and Romanians and showed the highest support of democracy’s importance. The increase in support for democracy in Poland between Waves 6 and 7 coincides with widespread, repeated national protests against the policies of the conservative Law and Justice Party. In the 2020 presidential election in Poland, President Andrzej Duda of the Law & Justice party barely won reelection over the liberal mayor of Warsaw, Rafal Trzaskowski, of the center-left Civic Platform party. The margin of Duda’s win was 51.03% vs 48.97%. It is probable that this uptick in valuation of democracy among Poles, even two-and-a-half years prior to the 2020 presidential election, reflects the growing concern among many Polish voters at the time that Law and Justice was violating principles of democratic governing. Americans and Romanians both show a decrease in support between these last two waves and remain virtually identical in their levels of support.

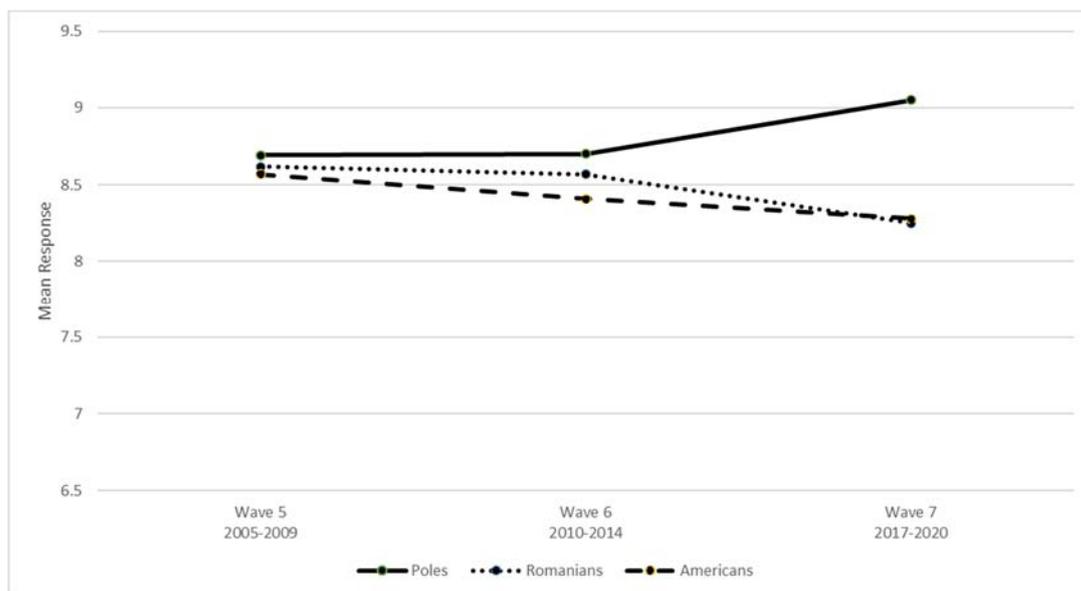


Figure 2. Mean response of Polish, Romanian, and American respondents on the importance of democracy, World Values Survey

Description. “How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?”

(1=Not at all important, 10=Absolutely important).

Figure 3 displays trends in responses on the measure of the extent of democracy in the respondent’s country. On this measure of democracy Americans are slightly above Poles in their level of support. Romanians are close to Poles in their attitudes in the 5th and 7th waves but dip in Wave 6. This dip may reflect disappointment on the part of Romanians with ongoing corruption despite President Basescu’s promises to curb it. A string of convictions from 2016 onwards may be the reason why Romanian respondents felt more positively about democracy in their country by Wave 7 when the differences between the three countries were relatively small.

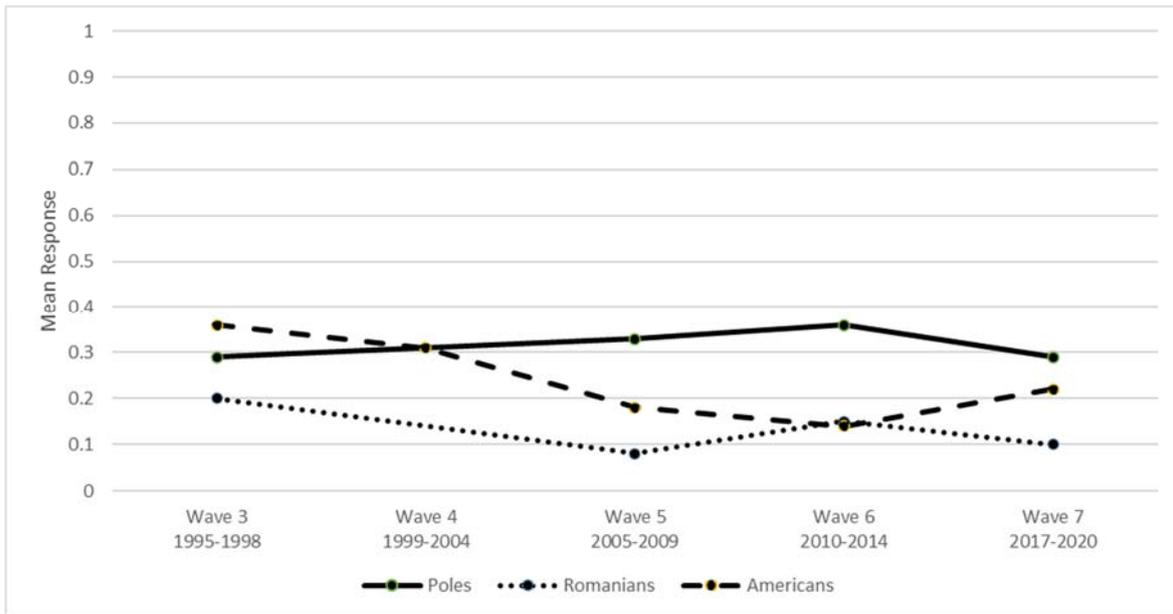


Figure 3. Mean response of Polish, Romanian, and American respondents on the extent of democracy in their country, World Values Survey

Description: “How democratically is this country being governed today?” (1=Not at all democratically, 10=Completely democratically).

Finally, Figure 4 provides a timeline on the importance people place on having a say in how their country is run. Note that the question asked respondents about the importance of a number of different goals (see the Appendix for details). Among those who chose “having more say,” Poles’ scores increased over time to rank the highest among the three countries beginning in Wave 5. Over the same time period, support declined in the U.S. and Romania. Romanians show a slight increase in support in Wave 6 but fall again in Wave 7. Americans do the opposite, with an increase in support in the 7th Wave bringing them closer to the level of support in Poland. Perhaps the reversal of the trend involving lowered faith in people having a say that took place between Wave 6 and Wave 7 in the U.S. was influenced by the Occupy Wall Street movement, especially its protesting of unemployment, high bonuses for executives, and government bailouts of financial systems.

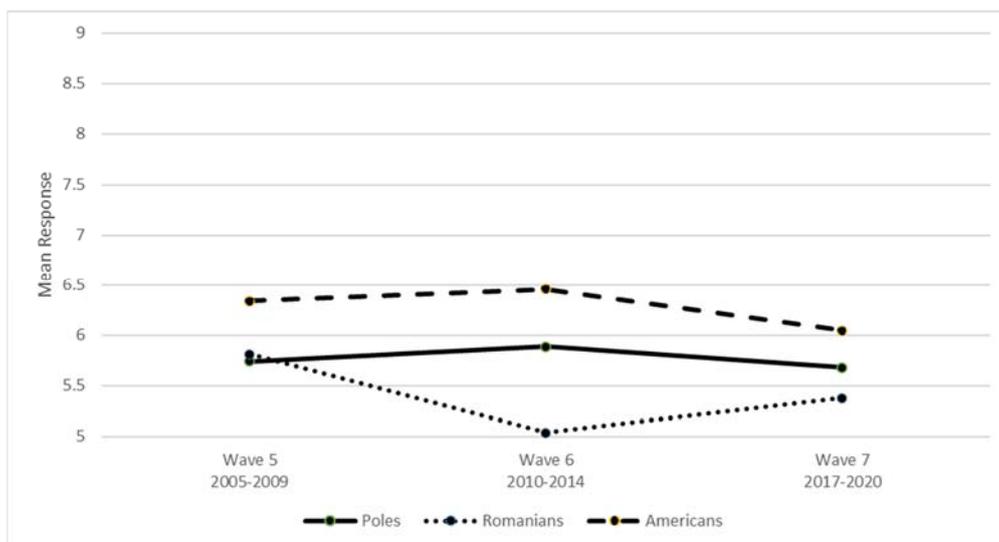


Figure 4. Mean response of Polish, Romanian, and American respondents on the importance of having more say, World Values Survey

Description: “People sometimes talk about what the aims of this country should be for the next ten years. On this card are

listed some of the goals which different people would give top priority. Would you please say which one of these you, yourself, consider the most important?" (1=People have more say about how things are done, 0=Another response).

Table 2. Means and t-tests on freedom, liberty, and democracy attitudes for men and women in Poland, Romania, and the U.S. (World Values Survey, Wave 7, 2017-20).⁺

		<u>Poland</u>		<u>Romania</u>		<u>U.S.</u>	
		<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
Freedom	<u>1)Rights</u>						
	Gender:						
	Men's rights jobs	0.72	0.76	0.41*	0.50*	0.91*	0.96*
	Immigrants:						
	Jobs priority immigrants	0.18	0.18	0.11	0.13	0.38*	0.43*
	Human:						
	Respect for human rights	---	---	2.23	2.23	2.75*	2.48*
	<u>2) Freedom of:</u>						
	Speech	0.16	0.17	0.13	0.12	0.29*	0.20*
	Choice+Control	7.18*	6.92*	7.76	7.59	7.68	7.81
Religion	---	---	2.83*	2.60*	3.25*	3.15*	
	People should have more to say on how						
Civil Liberties	things are done in the country	0.24*	0.33*	0.07*	0.12*	0.23	0.21
	Attended peaceful demonstration	0.13	0.11	0.11*	0.08*	0.20*	0.14*
Democracy	Democracy: Civil Rights Protect	8.48	8.38	8.27*	8.53*	8.06*	7.31*
	Democracy: Woman same rights men	8.92	9.03	7.98*	8.39*	8.63*	8.18*
	Importance of democracy	9.02	9.07	8.34	8.18	8.67*	7.92*
	How democratically country is run	5.81	5.55	5.40	5.36	6.25*	5.86*
	Vote in national elections	0.69	0.67	0.59	0.58	0.78*	0.69*

⁺ Subgroup sample sizes vary depending on missing values: Poland, men (556-639), women (628-706); Romania, men (535-1356), women (587-1467); U.S., men (941-1313), women (989-1332). *t-test is significant, $p < .05$. --- Question not asked.

4.3 Gender Effects

Data in Table 2 provide insight into research questions 1b and 2b which ask whether the country effects hold for both men and women. They also shed light on whether there is a single gender effect on democracy attitudes (research question 3). The data show gender divergence within countries on the freedom, liberty, and democracy items. However, these differences are more common in the U.S. and Romania than in Poland. With only two exceptions, gender variation on the democracy measures is virtually absent in Poland. The exceptions are that Polish men are more likely to support freedom of choice and control and Polish women are more likely to believe that people should have more say in how things are done in the country. Thus, in general, knowing how Poles think about democracy is knowing how Polish men and women feel about democracy.

In Romania there are slightly more gender differences than in Poland, but they still involve a minority of the attitude items. Romanian men and women differ on two measures of attitudes about freedom – men's rights to jobs and freedom of religion. Women are more likely to disagree with men's rights to jobs and men are more likely to support freedom of religion. Romanian men and women also diverge on the civil liberties items, with Romanian women more likely to think people should have more say and Romanian men more likely to have attended a peaceful demonstration. On the democracy items Romanian women show more support than Romanian men for the notion that democracy protects civil rights and women's rights.

In the U.S. men and women diverge on most of the items, but those measures that do show gender divergence vary between Romania and the U.S. Regarding the freedom items, U.S. women score higher than U.S. men on two of the six items (involving rights) and men score higher on three (most notably in the area of freedom of speech and religion). U.S. men score higher than U.S. women on civil liberties regarding attendance at peaceful demonstrations and on each of the democracy items. These results show that, in general, both U.S. men and women have more supportive attitudes than those in Poland and Romania on some variables (e.g., freedom) but not on others (e.g., democracy). However, the level of variation between men and women, especially in the U.S., suggests that one cannot understand democracy attitudes in the U.S. without considering gender. In fact, sometimes men or women in the U.S. diverge from the trend of high scores and share similar attitudes to men or women in the other countries. For example, U.S. men and Romanian men have somewhat similar attitudes on choice and control. It is U.S. women who score highest on this attitude measure. Thus, the gender results in Table 2 suggest that neither U.S. men nor women are more supportive of democracy than men and women in other countries. This finding reflects the complexity of democracy attitudes across countries when gender is considered, as addressed in research question 1b.

In answer to research question 2b, we find unique gender patterns within Poland and Romania, suggesting that men and women in these countries do not share a common gendered system of attitudes. In sum, the analysis of gender in the context of country differences in attitudes about democracy show gender diversity within countries (most notably the U.S. and Romania) and suggests that a focus on country differences alone, without a consideration of gender differences, masks the complexity of attitudes toward democracy.

Research question three asks whether women in each country hold more positive attitudes toward democracy than men. In each country it is sometimes men and sometimes women who show stronger support on the freedom, liberty, and democracy items, and the trend on who scores higher is not constant. The U.S. data show the largest number of gender differences with men usually displaying higher support. There is minimal diversity in Poland and more diversity in Romania. Finally, across the three countries, when a gender effect is significant it is not always in the same direction. For example, on the democracy question involving civil rights, U.S. men score significantly higher than U.S. women, but Romanian women score significantly higher than Romanian men. These findings do not support a single gender effect across countries – i.e., women are not always more supportive of democracy than men.

5. Discussion

An important issue to consider in a research project on attitudes is the distinction between attitudes and behavior. There are most likely differences between the attitudes measured in the WVS and real-world policies, practices, and behaviors. Earlier we noted that the attitudes associated with the American Dream (e.g., egalitarian values, democracy, inalienable rights) persisted even during times of slavery, as well as when women and minorities could not vote. Thus, our research is limited to conclusions specifically about *attitudes* toward democracy. An important goal for future researchers would be to examine whether there is a link between democracy attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, future research would benefit by adopting a methodology that includes both qualitative and quantitative measures of democracy attitudes and behaviors. Research that incorporates multiple methods often provides the richest insights into sociological phenomenon.

Some have suggested that it is difficult to use the same questions to measure democracy related attitudes across countries (Schaffer, 2014). Although this is a legitimate concern in comparative research, the WVS questionnaires have been carefully crafted to avoid ambiguous questions and thus minimize cross-national differences attributable to question wording. Additionally, researchers have found consistent differences between countries in Europe and elsewhere on democracy related attitudes, which implies reliability in the measures (e.g., Konieczna-Salamatin, 2021; Inglehart, 1997). Still, we agree with Schaeffer that more work needs to be done on identifying valid measures of democracy beliefs in cross-national survey research. Finally, some have suggested that when item bias exists in cross-national studies, it can be corrected by including control variables such as gender and education, which we have done (MacIntosh, 1998).

Our research, like all survey research, relies on individuals' responses to survey questions. Social scientists view behavior and attitudes as a product of needs, values, and experiences, and respondents are undoubtedly affected by these influences (Phillips & Clancy, 1972). The potential for respondents to portray themselves positively, that is to say, in a socially desirable way, has been recognized for some time (Johnson & Van De Vijer, 2003). The degree and existence of social desirability is topic dependent, occurring more frequently when sensitive issues or essential cultural values are discussed that respondents might feel obligated to conform to or identify with (e.g., ethics, happiness, religiosity, sexual behavior, illegal activities, drug use, income, and antisocial attitudes like racism) (Krumpal, 2013; Hammer et al, 2013; Phillips & Clancy, 1972). Researchers examining attitudes within and across countries encounter the same social desirability problems. The influence of social desirability might vary across subcultures, within a country, or across countries (Krysan & Couper, 2003; Johnson & Van De Vijer, 2003; Fang et al, 2016). Some have claimed success with

techniques that reduce social desirability, while others have noted that these attempts are generally unsuccessful (Steenkamp et al, 2010; Phillips & Clancy, 1972). Also, it has been argued that multiple indicators and probability samples yield higher validity in measures of attitudes (Allison et al, 2021). The social desirability issue becomes less problematic when there is widespread agreement on cultural values within countries (Johnson & Van De Vijer, 2003; Fang et al, 2016; Phillips & Clancy, 1972). With the possible exception of voting behavior (Hanmer et al., 2013), we examine a set of attitudes that is not usually affected by social desirability.

As mentioned earlier, attitudes about democracy are important because citizen support of democratic institutions is a prerequisite for a healthy, stable democracy to endure. Contemporary illustrations of this exist in both Poland and the U.S. where, according to many observers, elements of right-wing political parties have weakened democracy. Interestingly, our attitude measures in the most recent WVS wave 7 show that in both countries there is strong citizen support for democracy. It is likely that this support was a contributing factor to the results of the 2020 presidential election in the U.S. and the 2023 parliamentary election in Poland, both of which were viewed by many analysts as a rejection of anti-democratic principles.

Finally, our findings present a more nuanced image of public opinion toward democracy in the U.S. and CEE nations than previous research. Our use of multiple measures of attitudes about democracy and the democracy related concepts of freedom and liberty, as well as the inclusion of gender and time period, contribute to this nuance. Future research might provide further insights into the detailed process of attitude formation across countries by applying causal models that map out the complex direct and indirect links between country and attitudes about democracy.

6. Conclusions

Work by scholars on attitudes toward democracy have often shown differences between CEE and other countries, including the U.S., typically reporting more positive attitudes in the U.S. and similarity of attitudes in CEE countries (e.g., Inglehart, 1997; Konieczna-Salamatin, 2021). Additionally, past research has often assumed that women have more pro-democracy attitudes than men (Celis et al., 2013; Tyson, 2018). Our findings show that such simple conclusions about beliefs regarding democracy in the U.S. and CEE countries are not possible. For example, U.S. respondents are not always more positive about democracy than respondents in Poland and Romania; Poles and Romanians differ from each other on many attitudes; and women are not necessarily more pro-democracy than men. These findings vary when differences across time periods are taken into account.

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ⁱ Henceforth in these discussions we use the term “attitudes toward democracy” for simplicity. It is a term that includes the concepts of liberty and freedom.

ⁱⁱ The result of the 2023 election was the replacement of the far-right Law and Justice party that had been in power since 2015 with a coalition of left-of-center and right-of-center parties lead by the moderate Civic Platform party. This election, and its record 74.4% voter turnout, is considered by many analysts of Polish politics as a key step toward rehabilitating Poland’s democratic institutions after eight years of rule by Law and Society.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wave 7 data were collected between 11/17/2017 and 2/8/2018 in Poland; between 11/30/2017 and 4/2/2018 in Romania; and between 4/28/2017 and 5/31/2017 in the U.S.

^{iv} Waves 3-7 were collected in years 1998, 1999, 2005, 2012, and 2017, respectively, in Romania. Waves 3-7 were collected in 1997, 1999, 2005, 2012, and 2017-18, respectively, in Poland. Waves 3-7 were collected in 1995, 2000, 2006, 2011, and 2017, respectively, in the U.S.

^v Computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) was the mode of administration in Poland and Romania; computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) was employed in the U.S. Not all questions were asked in every wave in all three countries.

^{vi} Although our research questions are descriptive, we explore other possible causal explanations of differences in beliefs about democracy in some of our analyses. We test whether the country differences hold when education, employment status, marital status, age, and gender are taken into account.

Appendix A: Measures

From the range of measures of attitudes toward democracy, freedom, and civil liberties available in the WVS, we utilize a battery of indicators that most closely match our conceptual framework.^v Gender and country are the independent variables in our analyses; attitudes toward the various aspects of democracy are the dependent variables.^v All variables are coded (or recoded) such that high scores reflect more liberal/progressive responses and low scores reflect more traditional/conservative responses. Details on measures are provided below.

1. Freedom

We include two measures of freedom: the first is rights—gender, immigrant, and human rights. **Gender rights** are measured with the following question: “When jobs are scarce men should have more right to a job than women.” Responses were recoded as agree (0) and disagree (1); responses of “neither” were declared as missing. **Immigrant rights** are measured with an analogous question: “When jobs are scarce, employers should give priority to (Polish/American/ Romanian) people.” We coded “neither” as missing, and assigned a code of 0 to “agree” and 1 to “disagree.” **Human rights** are measured with the question: “How much respect is there for individual human rights nowadays in this country? Do you feel there is: no respect at all (recoded to 1); not much respect (2); some respect (3); a lot of respect (4).”

Freedom of speech, choice and control, and religion is a second component of freedom measured here. **Freedom of speech** is measured with a question that asks: “If you had to choose, which one of the things on this card would you say is most important? Maintaining order in the nation; giving people more say in important government decisions; fighting rising prices; or protecting freedom of speech.” If respondents chose freedom of speech the answer was coded 1. All other choices were coded 0. **Freedom of choice and control** is measured with responses to the following question: “Some people feel they have completely free choice and control over their lives, while other people feel that what they do has no real effect on what happens to them. Please use the scale where 1 means “no choice at all” and 10 means “a great deal of choice” to indicate how much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out.” **Freedom of religion** is measured as follows - “Please tell us [on a scale of 1 to 4] if you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statement: The only acceptable religion is my religion.”

2. Civil Liberties

We use two measures of *Civil Liberties*. One is **whether people should have more to say on how things are done in**

their country: “People sometimes talk about what the aims of this country should be for the next ten years. On this card are listed some of the goals which different people would give top priority. Would you please say which one of these you, yourself, consider the most important?” Response options were “A high level of economic growth; making sure this country has strong defense forces; seeing that people have more say about how things are done at their jobs and in their communities; and trying to make our cities and countryside more beautiful.” “Seeing that people have more to say about how things are done at their jobs and in their communities” was coded 1, other responses were coded 0.

A second question about civil liberties asks whether respondents **attended a peaceful demonstration:** “Now I’d like you to look at this card. I’m going to read out some forms of political action that people can take, and I’d like you to tell me, for each one, whether you have done any of these things, whether you might do it, or would never under any circumstances do it: Attending peaceful demonstrations.” Respondents who had participated in a peaceful demonstration were coded 1, 0 otherwise.

3. Democracy

Our measures of attitudes about democracy are consistent with those used by a number of other researchers (e.g., Konieczna-Salamatin, 2021; Klingemann et al., 2006; Wuttke et al., 2022). Given the multi-dimensionality of democracy (Canache et al., 2001) we employ multiple measures, as detailed below.

The first two measures come from a question that asked: “Many things are desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. Please tell me for each of the following things how essential you think it is as a characteristic of democracy. Use this scale where 1 means ‘not at all an essential characteristic of democracy’ and 10 means ‘it definitely is an essential characteristic of democracy:’” “Civil rights protect people from state oppression” and “Women have the same rights as men”.

Three additional measures of attitudes toward democracy are also included. The first measures **the importance of democracy:** “How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?” (1 = not at all important to 10 = absolutely important.) The second measure asks: “And **how democratically is this country being governed today?**” (1 = not at all democratic to 10 = completely democratic). Finally, respondents were also asked about **voting:** “When elections take place, do you vote always, usually, or never? Please tell me for ... national level.” Responses were recoded as “always” (1) and “usually” or “never” (0).