

## IS THERE AND HAS THERE BEEN A “POLISH VOTE”? A PARTLY CONTRARY VIEW

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### **Abstract**

This paper looks at the “Polish vote” in U.S. presidential elections since 1940, when Polish American voters – the foreign born who had become citizens and their American born offspring – had become a significant factor. The issue of Poland was found to be salient in just five of these twenty elections. In only three of these, in 1944, 1948, and 1976, were the elections closely contested, thus enabling a true Polish vote to ‘matter’ in the outcome. Poland was not salient in the other fifteen elections. In them, Polish Americans’ voting preferences were more likely to be based on their views of the candidates, their party identification, ideological leanings, socio-economic background, and economic conditions at the time. In only one of these fifteen elections did the Polish American vote play a possibly decisive role in the outcome – the election of 1960.

**Key Words:** *Polish Vote, “Polish” States, Poland, Polish American Congress*

## **A PARTLY CONTRARY VIEW**

An introductory note: Following the 2020 U.S. presidential election the role of voters of Polish origin and ancestry became a topic for discussion for several political science professors, among them– David Jackson of Bowling Green State University in Ohio, John Kromkowski of the Catholic University in Washington, DC, Anne Gurnack of the University of Wisconsin in Kenosha, and the author. All were intrigued about the role of Polish American voters in affecting the results in three hotly contested states with large numbers of Americans of Polish origin and ancestry – Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. While looking at the 2020 election, they also looked at the factors affecting Polish Americans’ vote choices over the years, a topic nearly unnoticed in the presidential election literature. What follows is indirectly focused on the 2020 election and deals with a broader question – that of the existence, of a significant “Polish vote” in presidential elections over the past eighty years. At first glance, the question about the Polish vote in U.S. elections gets a quick ‘Yes’ answer. Of course, there has been, and may even continue to be, a “Polish vote” in America’s elections! At times it may have been significant, even if seldom recognized. But is this the case? The Conventional View. We do have a lot of information that leads us to recognise that a substantial Polish vote in U.S. elections has existed for many years. For example, an entry in Wikipedia provides survey data, some dubious, on the Polish vote in U.S. presidential elections going all the way back to 1916<sup>1</sup>. We also have a few scholarly studies on the Polish vote in presidential elections, both published and unpublished<sup>2</sup>. And we know, for example, that since 1918, 49 Polish Americans have won seats in the U.S. House of Representatives; 30 from districts having large numbers of Polish residents – in Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee and Buffalo.<sup>3</sup>

Focusing on Presidential elections I have constructed a table of information (below). It covers various data connected with the twenty elections from 1940 to 2016. These

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia, “Polish American Vote.” Last modified 20 November 2021. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polish-American\\_vote](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polish-American_vote) While I do not deal here with the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, in 2016 Republican Donald J. Trump, while losing the popular vote, won in the Electoral College, narrowly carrying three states (and 46 electoral votes) with substantial numbers of voters of Polish ethnic origin – Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania. In losing in 2020, his Democratic opponent Joseph R. Biden, narrowly took those same three states.

<sup>2</sup> Among published works the most notable one is by Richard C. Lukas, *The Strange Allies: The United States and Poland, 1941-1945* (Knoxville: U. of Tennessee, 1978). Unpublished and survey-based papers completed in 2021 are those by Anne Gurnack, “Polish Americans, Political Partisanship, and Presidential Election Voting, 1972-2016,” David Jackson, “The 2020 Polish American Vote,” and John Kromkowski, “Replacing Ethnicity with Nationality.” While taking up the subject in different ways, the three agree that a ‘Polish American vote’ continues to exist and may be particularly important in closely contested elections where large numbers of Polish Americans live, that it remains more pro Democrat than the vote by other European ancestry Americans, that it has become more conservative and pro Republican in recent years, that it is affected by intermarriage between individuals of Polish origin and persons of other ethnic ancestries, that it is weakening among the grandchildren, great grandchildren and even earlier descendants of Polish immigrants, but that “being Polish” retains a certain and even strong symbolic influence on individuals who identify as Polish or are so identified by others.

<sup>3</sup> Biographies of U.S. Congressmen and Senators of Polish origin are in James S. Pula, ed., *The Polish American Encyclopedia* (Jefferson, N.C. and London: MacFarland, 2011). On local officials, see Angela T. Pienkos, ed. *Ethnic Politics in Urban America: The Polish Experience in Four Cities* (Chicago: Polish American Historical Association, 1978).

data are the basis of this essay. In it we see who won each election, their political party, their all-important electoral college margin of victory, and the share of the popular vote cast for the Democratic candidate. Next a column identifies the percentage of the vote cast by Polish Americans for the Democratic candidate in each election, data readily compared with the overall Democratic party vote. They show that Polish Americans have usually voted more heavily for Democratic candidates than Republicans, often by very wide margins (1940, 1944, 1948, 1960, and 1964). But in eight elections, six beginning in 1972, more Americans of Polish origin voted for the Republicans than the Democrats.

**Table 1. Presidential Elections and the Polish Vote: 1940 – 2016\***

Year	Winner	Vote	Democrat	Vote %	"Polish" States Vote	
1940	FDR (D)	449-82	54.70%	90.00%	9D	199-19
1944	FDR (D)	432-99	53.40%	90.00%	8D	177-37
1948	Truman (D)	303-189	49.6%	80.00%	4D	81-133
1952	Eisen. (R)	442-89	44.30%	30.00%	0D	0-210
1956	Eisen. (R)	457-73	42.00%	49.00%	0D	0-210
1960	Kennedy (D)	303-219	49.70%	78.00%	8D	173-37
1964	Johnson (D)	486-52	61.10%	80.00%	10D	206-0
1968	Nixon (R)	303-191	42.70%	56.00%	6D	125-81
1972	Nixon (R)	520-17	37.50%	47.00%	0D	0-200
1976	Carter (D)	297-240	50.10%	60.00%	6D	128-72
1980	Reagan (R)	489-49	41%	43.00%	1D	10-190
1984	Reagan (R)	525-13	40.60%	49.00%	0D	0-186
1988	Bush (R)	426-111	45.60%	43.00%	4D	70-116
1992	Clinton (D)	370-168	43.00%	42.00%	10D	173-0
1996	Clinton (D)	379-159	49.30%	48.00%	10D	173-0
2000	Bush II (R)	271-266	48.40%	45.00%	9D	152-21
2004	Bush II (R)	286-251	48.30%	47.00%	9D	144-20
2008	Obama (D)	365-173	52.90%	52.00%	10D	154-0
2012	Obama (D)	332-206	51.10%	50.00%	10D	155-0
2016	Trump (R)	304-227	48.60%	26.0-42.0%	6D	90-64

\* Note that significant third-party presidential candidates campaigned in 1948, 1968, 1980, 1992, and 1996.

Republican candidates won the "Polish vote" in 1952, 1956, 1972, 1984, 1988, 2000, 2004, and 2016.

Finally on the right side of this table I have identified those states, ten in all, that have historically been home for the overwhelming majority of Americans of Polish origin. The basis for this information comes from the U.S. Census for 1930, the U.S. Census Bureau's surveys of national ancestry of 1980, 1990, and 2000, and from the Census Bureau's American Community Surveys of 2008 and 2018. These pieces of information do differ a bit from one another. Thus, the decennial Census counts everybody but only reports the number of foreign born and their native born ("foreign stock") children. The national ancestry data were based on estimates from surveys

of one of every six U.S. households. The community surveys are based on findings derived from information from one of every thirty households. Nonetheless I conclude that all provide reliable information on the Polish ethnic population in the U.S. over the years. Thus, the 1930 Census reported that the Polish immigrants and their native-born offspring, but not the grandchildren of immigrants (who may have counted for another 1.5 million persons) numbered 3,342,000 persons in a U.S. population of 122 million. Adding them into the mix, my guess is that in all roughly four percent of the country's total population was ethnically Polish in origin in 1930<sup>4</sup>. In 1930, 86 percent of the Polish immigrant and foreign stock population resided in just ten U.S. states. These were Connecticut, where they constituted 8.3 percent of the population, Michigan (6.6), New Jersey (6.5), New York and Illinois (6.2 each), Pennsylvania (5.4), Wisconsin (4.7), Massachusetts (4.4), Ohio (2.6), and Maryland (2.2). Together persons of Polish origin comprised 5 percent of these states' combined population. In contrast, in the country's other 38 states they counted for less than 1 tenth of 1 percent of the population. In the years since 1930 one sees a downward trend in both the proportion of the population of Americans of Polish origin in the U.S. and their presence in the ten "most Polish" states. In 1980, 8,228,000 persons identified as Polish, either fully or in part, or 3.7 percent of the total U.S. population. In all, 77 percent of those so identified resided in the ten "Polish" states. In 2008, 9.6 million so identified (3.2 percent of the total U.S. population), with 63 percent in the historically "Polish" states. In 2018, the figures were 9,153,000, or 2.8 percent of the population in a country of 325 million inhabitants, with 61 percent in the ten "Polish" states. Here the rankings were Wisconsin (8.6 percent of the state's population), Michigan (8.3), Connecticut (7.3), Illinois (6.8), Pennsylvania (6.3), New Jersey (5.5), New York (5.4), Massachusetts (4.5), Ohio (3.7), and Maryland (3.1). Two additional points can be made from a look at Table 1. First, one sees a dramatic decline in the relative significance of the ten states having the largest Polish populations compared to other states around the country, most notably the South and West.

This is due to their slower rate of growth due to economic changes in the country, along with the retirement decisions of many Americans, including Polish Americans to move to warmer, less expensive parts of the country. Politically, the decline has been especially dramatic. In 1940, the ten "Polish" states had 218 electoral votes out of 531, or 41 percent of the country's 531 electoral votes. In 2020 their share of 153 electoral votes out of 538 electoral votes in all was just 28 percent.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census data for 1930 are in Andrzej Brozek, *Polish Americans 1854-1939* (Warsaw: Interpress, 1985), pp. 238-40. The 2008 Census Bureau's American Community Survey is in Thaddeus C. Radzilowski and Dominik Stecula, *Polish Americans Today* (Detroit: Piast Institute, 2010). See Wikipedia for the Census survey of 1980 and the American Community Survey of 2018

<sup>5</sup> These states have also lost seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, from 198 in 1940 to 133 in 2020. Along with this decline has been a steep drop in the number of Polish Americans in Congress, from twelve in 1958 to just three in 2020, two from a "Polish" state. In 1958, Chicago had four congressmen of Polish origin, Detroit three, Buffalo and Milwaukee one each. In 2020, none of these historically "Polish" cities had a congressman of Polish origin.

Two: Why start with the year 1940? A good reason involves the rising significance of Poles as voters. Yes, Poles as residents had long been visible, especially in those parts of the U.S. where their numbers were great. Indeed from 1880, when the 500,000 mainly Polish immigrant population was 1 percent of the U.S. population, the number had grown to 2 million in 1900 and to 4 million in 1914. By then the Poles accounted for four percent of the total American population. But numbers alone were but part of the story. By the 1920s, there were the 1,000 plus churches the immigrants and their offspring had built, their countless neighbourhood fraternal societies and social clubs, and their impressive Polish language press, which by the 1930s included ten daily papers and dozens more weeklies and monthlies. However, numbers and visibility alone did not immediately translate into voting powers since many immigrants – who made up the bulk of the total Polish population into the 1930s – did not rush to apply for U.S. citizenship. But by 1940, with mass immigration having ended nearly twenty years before, nearly all the Poles who had come to America had decided to remain here and become naturalized citizens. This made them, along with their American born sons, daughters and grandchildren, eligible to vote.<sup>6</sup> With respect to the 20 presidential elections themselves, in the first seven - from 1940 through to 1964, the ‘Polish vote’ went overwhelmingly for the Democratic party’s candidate. It ranged from 19 percent to 36 percent above the candidate’s overall popular vote won. The only exceptions were in 1952 and 1956 when General Dwight D. Eisenhower, a genuine “above party” figure, won as a Republican.<sup>7</sup>

In the thirteen elections from 1968 to 2016 (and most likely 2020), Polish voter support for the Democratic candidate dropped, sometimes substantially. In six of them it was the Republican nominee who actually won the “Polish vote”.

How to account for this change? Here we are dealing with two distinct factors. Into the 1960s, the Poles in America were part of America’s urban industrial working class. Moreover, they, like so many other people of east central European immigrant origin, were hit hard by the Great Depression that began in 1929. As a result, in 1932 they turned in overwhelming numbers to the Democratic party and the Depression-fighting, pro-labour union “New Deal” presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Their Democratic party ties were further reinforced by their adherence to the Cath-

<sup>6</sup> One example of the Polish vote in the days of mass migration: in 1916 President Woodrow Wilson narrowly defeated his Republican opponent by a 277-254 electoral college margin. In all 18,540,000 votes were cast. While Poles then made-up 4 percent of the population, only male citizens over the age of 21 could vote – most likely around 300,000 or

1.5 percent of the total. While over 70 percent are estimated to have supported Wilson, only Ohio’s 26 electoral votes went to him. The other nine’s 183 electoral votes went to his opponent. By comparison, in 1940 as many as 2.5 million Polish Americans may have voted (about 5 percent of the total).

On the immigrant-dominated Polish community before World War II, see Brozek, pp. 311-325 and Pula. Here, my own family story may be of interest. My four grandparents arrived in the U.S. from Austrian ruled Galicia between 1907 and 1913. But it was not until 1940 that all four had become “naturalised” U.S. citizens – one in 1924 at age 34, a second in 1932 at age 41, a third in 1935 at age 44 and a fourth in 1940 at age 45. In 1932 none of their ten U.S. born children were old enough to vote. By 1944, nine were. In 1916, my family had no potential voters. In 1944 there were 13

<sup>7</sup> Indeed President Truman supported Eisenhower’s candidacy in 1952 if he chose to run as a Democrat. David McCullough, Truman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), pp. 887-889.



olic Church, whose advocates preached social teachings that ran parallel to those of the “New Deal”. But these ties began unraveling in the 1960s and 1970s, as many third and some second-generation Polish Americans moved into the “middle class”. Whether we define this movement in terms of their entry into, and completion of, college, their work experiences in private and public service and away from the jobs their parents and grandparents had held in factories, mills, mines, meatpacking houses, or their relocating to new homes away from the ageing central city neighbourhoods that had defined Polish community life since the end of the nineteenth century, the Polish American population was changing – and changing significantly. Polish American voter loyalty to the Democratic party was also severely tested in the 1960s and 1970s. There was frustration over its leaders’ handling of the endless war in Vietnam, together with the emergence of other, divisive, cultural issues in American society and within the Democratic party itself. Most notable was the impact of the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* in 1973.

What is more, the polarising divisions of the 1970s have continued for decades. In short, Polish Americans today, 95 percent of them native-born, divide almost evenly between Democratic party loyalists, many of them in, or retired from, “blue collar” jobs and ‘middle class’ Republican identifiers who much more frequently have college and post college educations. Complicating things is their Catholic identity since the Church holds socially conservative positions on issues like abortion and same sex marriage while taking liberal stands on behalf of the poor and on immigration. In short, the voting behavior of Polish Americans, like other Americans of east central European ancestry, has come to be more than adequately predicted by knowing their income, the kind of work they do, their educational attainments, strength of religious ties, place of residence, and traditional party loyalty. Indeed, given the powerful explanatory value of these voter characteristics, pollsters no longer bother to ask about the national ancestry of so called “white ethnic” Americans.<sup>8</sup>

But is this the whole story? I do not think so. Yes, there has indeed been a “Polish vote” in presidential elections. But, I argue, this has only come into play as a potentially important factor (with one exception to be noted below) when the fate of Poland itself was a salient issue and when the contest was closely contested. Only when these two conditions have been met have voters of Polish origin had reason to vote as Polish Americans.

Of these presidential elections, eleven were relatively closely contested. But in only three closely contested elections was Poland a salient issue. These were in 1944, when

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<sup>8</sup> On Polish Americans’ changing social class character from the 1960s, see Pula, *Encyclopedia*, pp. 101-111, 178-184; Helena Z. Lopata, *Polish Americans* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1976), pp. 88-117; and Radzilowski and Stecula. On the issues dividing the Democrats, see Donald E. Pienkos, “The New Ethnicity Movement and Polish Americans,” *Polish American Studies*, 76, Number 2 (Autumn 2019), 67-69. Note too the Polish American Congress’ Amicus Curiae objections to Affirmative Action to the U.S. Supreme Court, in Donald E. Pienkos, *For your Freedom Through Ours: Polish American Efforts on Poland’s Behalf* (New York: Columbia U. Press, 1991), pp. 159-160. Note Radzilowski and Stecula p. 2

President Roosevelt ran for an unprecedented fourth term in office; in 1948, when his successor, Harry Truman, surprised everyone but himself by his photo finish win over New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey, and in 1976 when Jimmy Carter defeated President Gerald R. Ford.

**Table 2: A look at Poland's Salience in U.S. Presidential elections**

Poland as an Issue	Close Election	One-Sided Election
Poland as Salient	1944, 1948, 1976	1952, 1980
Poland Not Salient	1960, 1968, 1988, 1992	1940, 1956, 1964, 1972,
	2000, 2004, 2012, 2016	1984, 1996, 2008

Poland was also salient in two elections that were not close. In 1952, the cause of Soviet-dominated Poland was important at a time of grave Cold War antagonism. But General Dwight D. Eisenhower, a true “above party candidate,” won in overwhelming fashion and with substantial Polish voter support. In 1980, crisis-ridden Poland, its Solidarity labour union, and John Paul II, “the Pope from Poland,” were often on the front pages of America’s newspapers. Yet, because both Republican Ronald W. Reagan and President Carter both strongly backed the Solidarity cause, Poland did not surface as a campaign issue. Indeed, after it joined the NATO alliance in 1999, post-communist Poland was not a factor in George W. Bush’s narrow wins in 2000 and 2004.<sup>9</sup>

In only three elections were the results both quite close and Poland-related in a salient manner – in 1944, 1948, and 1976. Yet how very differently the issue of Poland played out in each!

### **NOVEMBER 1944 – AN ELECTION THAT MIGHT HAVE TURNED OUT DIFFERENTLY**

That year, and in the midst of World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt won an unprecedented fourth term over Thomas E. Dewey. At first glance his impressive, even massive victory of 432-99 in the electoral college – that of a trusted veteran war-time president, looks unsurprising. But there is a back story to this election, and it involved Poland and the Polish Americans.

In December 1943, just eleven months before the election, FDR and his two wartime allies, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Josef Stalin, the ruler of the

<sup>9</sup> On Eisenhower’s appeal, see Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1955). Poland’s salience in 1952 was real. One sign of this was the ongoing special U.S. Congressional investigation into Soviet responsibility for the Katyn Forest Massacre of 1940 of over 20,000 Polish military officers and civic leaders. Excerpts of the committee’s findings are in Pienkos, *For Your Freedom*, pp. 300-308. On Carter’s support for Solidarity, see Donald E. Pienkos, review of Justin Vaisse’s biography of Zbigniew Brzezinski, in *The Polish Review*, 64, Number 4 (Winter 2019), 115-116. On Reagan and Carter, see Pienkos, *For Your Freedom*, pp. 182 -196, 371-387, and Seth A. Jones, *Covert Action: Reagan, the CIA, and the Cold War Struggle in Poland* (New York: Norton, 2018)

Soviet Union, held their first, critically important, summit conference in Tehran, Iran. There, in a private talk with Stalin, Roosevelt told Stalin that he agreed that the Soviet Union should keep the eastern half of pre-war Poland once the war was won. This vast territory Stalin had seized in September 1939 when he and Hitler had destroyed the Polish state. Ignoring the U.S. alliance with Poland's exile government in London, Roosevelt asked only that Stalin keep the matter private, since he was planning for his re-election in 1944 and needed the votes of the "six to seven million Americans of Polish extraction" to help insure his victory.<sup>10</sup>

FDR had good reason to worry about the consequences if his words were leaked. In June 1944, Polish Americans, at a massive patriotic congress they held in Buffalo, New York, declared their support for a free, post-war Poland with its 1939 eastern border restored. In response, on October 11, Pulaski Day, Roosevelt invited Polish American Congress President, Charles Rozmarek and his fellow officers to the White House. There he gave them the misleading impression that he backed their position on Poland's eastern border. Still concerned, at the very end of his campaign, he met again with Rozmarek in Chicago. There he pressed him for his personal support. FDR then put out a widely published statement that the Polish American Congress had endorsed him. By this time Roosevelt had a new reason to be concerned. Just weeks before, Poland's Prime Minister had met with Stalin in Moscow. There Stalin's foreign minister, Molotov, blurted out that FDR had agreed to give away Poland's eastern territory at Teheran. Afterwards, U.S. Ambassador Averill Harriman urged the distressed Pole to be silent about Molotov's shocking revelation.<sup>11</sup>

What might have occurred had this "political dynamite" exploded before the U.S. election?<sup>12</sup> How many Polish American voters might have turned against FDR? And what about the general public's reaction? Would the outcome have been different?

We will never know.

In fact, Roosevelt won re-election but his popular margin, despite the 9-1 support he received from Polish Americans, was the smallest in his four presidential campaigns. He did carry eight of the ten states where the Polish vote was most substantial, winning the 177 electoral votes of New York, New Jersey, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Maryland. Only Ohio and Wisconsin's 37 electoral votes went to Dewey. But his victory margin in Michigan was just 22,000 in 2.2 million votes, 26,000 in New Jersey out of 2 million, 105,000 in Pennsylvania out of 3.8 million, and 140,000 in Illinois where over four million votes were cast.

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<sup>10</sup> James McGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Soldier of Freedom* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), pp. 413-414, 533-34; Susan Butler, *Roosevelt and Stalin: A Portrait of a Friendship* (New York: Knopf, 2015), pp. 123-140; Charles Bohlen, *Witness to History 1919-1969* (New York: Norton, 1973), pp. 144-152. On Roosevelt's view of Poland prior to the Teheran summit, see Piotr S. Wandycz, *The United States and Poland* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard U. Press, 1980), pp. 258-277.

<sup>11</sup> Jan Karski, *The Great Powers and Poland, 1919-1945* (London and New York: University Press of America, 1985), pp. 559-562. Richard C. Lukas, "The Polish American Congress and the Polish Question, 1944-1947," *Polish American Studies*, 38, number 2 (Autumn 1981), 39-54.

<sup>12</sup> The words were those of FDR's key advisor Harry Hopkins, Wandycz, p. 277.



Unaware of his actual Poland policy, the voters in these four states alone gave FDR 98 electoral votes.<sup>13</sup>

But we do know that in March 1945, after FDR addressed a joint session of the U.S. Congress following his second summit meeting with Stalin at Yalta, Rozmarek and the PAC bitterly denounced the decisions on Poland as a betrayal of America's reasons for fighting the War. This at a time when the war was moving to a successful conclusion, FDR was at the peak of his popularity, and the public's initial response to his speech on Yalta was overwhelmingly positive.<sup>14</sup>

In 1948, Roosevelt's successor, Harry Truman, who like his opponent, Dewey again, had become a staunch cold warrior, won – but barely. And while he held onto eighty percent of the Polish vote, the PAC, which could not forget Yalta, opposed him. Indeed, he lost six of the ten “Polish” states. And in two of the four where he won, his margin was very narrow – just 7,000 votes in Ohio and 36,000 votes in Illinois. He easily carried the other two, Massachusetts and Wisconsin. Had Truman lost Illinois' 28 electoral votes and Ohio's 25, he would have failed to win a majority of the electoral college votes. The House of Representatives would have then had to choose the next president.<sup>15</sup>

### **1976 - A UNIQUE ELECTION?**

Poland and the “Polish vote” may have come into play in a most dramatic if accidental way, thanks to President Gerald R. Ford's amazing misstatement in his October 6, 1976 nationally televised debate – on foreign policy – with his Democratic party challenger, ex-Georgia governor Jimmy Carter. There, Ford asserted that communist-run Poland, a Cold War Soviet satellite, was not under Soviet domination. He dropped six points in the polls and wound up losing the election by 50-49 percent in the popular vote and 297-240 in the electoral college. Polish voters went 60-40 for Carter, who won the 128 electoral votes of six of the “Polish” states. Ford won the 72 electoral votes of Connecticut, New Jersey, Michigan (his home state), and Illinois, where PAC president Aloysius Mazewski ‘moved mountains’ on his behalf.

But did Ford's ‘Poland gaffe’ cost him the election? Or was it the weak economy? Or his pardoning of Richard Nixon? Or that he was a weak candidate who had barely won his own party's nomination just months before the election?<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Lukas, *The Strange Allies*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>14</sup> Polish American Congress Memorandum to President Roosevelt in Connection with the Yalta conference, March 15, 1945, excerpt in Pienkos, *For Your Freedom*, p. 279, and pp. 114-119, 265-278. Privately, FDR accepted the view of his confidant, Admiral Leahy, that the agreement on Poland at Yalta was worthless. Wandycz, p. 298. The public initially backed his rosy report on Yalta by a margin of 61-9 percent.

<sup>15</sup> McCullough skirts the whole subject in his Truman biography.

<sup>16</sup> Ford's gaffe had much to do with his concerns over the “Sonnenfeldt doctrine” concerned him. Wandycz, pp. 404- 407; and Pienkos, *For Your Freedom*, pp. 170-171, 350-360. Ford's view is in Tom De Frank, *‘Write it when I'm Gone’: Remarkable off the Record Conversations with Gerald R. Ford* (New York: Putnam, 2007). A look at the public opinion surveys shows Ford trailing Carter by a 50-37 margin in September but had him just behind 47-45 on the eve of the October debate. After Ford's debate blunder, he dropped behind 48-42. Still, on the eve of the election the two candidates were exactly even. Jeffrey M. Jones, “Gerald Ford Retrospective,” Gallup Poll News Service, December 29, 2006.

### **THE ONE EXCEPTION: 1960**

In one Presidential election the Polish vote may well have played a major role. This was in Senator John F. Kennedy's paper thin 112,881 vote victory (out of 68,832,818 cast) over Vice President Richard M. Nixon. Indeed, in this still memorable contest, both candidates - young, articulate, hard line Cold Warriors - did make much of their concerns about Soviet-dominated Poland in appealing to Polish Americans. That May Nixon spoke to over 100,000 listeners at the annual Polish Constitution Day observance in Chicago. In October Kennedy addressed the Polish American Congress at its national convention. However, their identical views meant that Poland in practical terms vanished as a campaign issue in 1960.

Polish Americans, by voting for Kennedy by a 78-22 margin, did help him win all but two of the 10 most "Polish" states - Ohio and Wisconsin. He received 177 of the 303 electoral votes he needed from the eight "Polish" states he did carry to defeat Nixon, who won 219. Remarkably, Kennedy won Illinois' 27 electoral votes by just 8,858 votes (out of 4,746,834) and New Jersey's 16 electoral votes by only 22,191 votes out of 2,748,738. Had he lost them, the election would have been decided in the House of Representatives.

Kennedy did benefit greatly by winning the Polish vote. But his success was due to his putting together a "New Deal" style coalition that brought working class, unionised, Catholic Polish American voters back into the Democratic fold - and at a time when the country was experiencing an economic recession.<sup>17</sup>

A Postscript: An issue that never was. A debate arose over the future of the NATO alliance with the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the Cold War. Here the Polish American Congress came out strongly, not only for keeping NATO but for bringing in post-communist Poland, Hungary and the Czech and Slovak republics. Its efforts came to a head in January 1994 at an extraordinary meeting in Milwaukee of representatives of President Clinton and leaders from the four ethnic communities. There PAC President Edward Moskal spoke out bluntly, declaring that the failure to expand NATO would amount to nothing less than a "second Yalta." Two months later at the White House, President Clinton told the same group that "the door to NATO expansion is open". In April 1998, the U.S. Senate approved expansion by a 80-19 vote. In the fourteen states where the PAC was strongest (the ten "Polish" states and Indiana, California, Rhode Island and Florida), the Senators' vote was 26-2. In May 1999 NATO welcomed three new members into the alliance. These actions also took the issue off the table in the 2000 election.<sup>18</sup> In conclusion, since entering NATO in

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<sup>17</sup> Theodore White, *The Making of the President 1960* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), p. 385. On Kennedy, see Jan Wszelaki, ed., *John F. Kennedy and Poland* (New York: Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America, 1964). For Nixon, see his impressive *Six Crises* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), pp. 283-287 and elsewhere.

<sup>18</sup> Donald E. Pienkos, "Witness to History: Polish Americans and the Genesis of NATO Enlargement," *The Polish Review*, 44 number 3 (Autumn 1999), 334-335; Leszek Kuczynski and Wojciech Bialaszewicz, *Expansion of NATO: Role of the Polish American Congress* (Chicago: Alliance Printers and Publishers, 1999), pp. 48-50

1999, Poland has ceased to be salient in U.S. presidential elections. Of course, Polish Americans have voted in great numbers in the six elections that were held from 2000 to 2020. But in them they, like their fellow Americans, have made their choices based on their own party identification, ideological preferences, economic situation, religious convictions, and evaluations of the candidates. And while many Polish Americans will doubtless continue to maintain their appreciation of their heritage and share it with their fellow Americans, Poland itself will, hopefully, no longer become a salient issue in U.S. politics and presidential elections!

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