

POLISH AMERICANS, POLITICAL PARTISANSHIP AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS VOTING: 1972-2020

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Abstract:

Although there are 10 million Polish Americans in the United States, this group has been understudied recently, with most work relying on unrepresentative samples. We fill in knowledge gaps on party affiliation and presidential voting with data from 1972-2018 waves of the General Social Survey. Until the last decade, Polish Americans were consistently Democratic in party identification and presidential voting. Recently, however, this group's voting has become more moderate, bringing it into greater alignment with the overall American electorate. Our findings support current political thought about US Poles overall, while challenging secondary assumptions in ways that suggest further longitudinal study.

Key words: *Polish Americans, Voting, Partisanship, Ethnicity, American Politics*

INTRODUCTION

Immigrants swelled the United States during the years 1890-1920, adding millions to the population of the country. At that time, they were mostly poor and unskilled in search for work opportunities and freedoms available in their newly adopted home. Many of these new arrivals were attracted to economic policies promoted by the Democratic Party and voted accordingly. Poles were no exception as they adapted to the political environment of this country. They were particularly devoted to New Deal efforts during the years when Franklin Delano Roosevelt was in the White House. The Poles were drawn to the economic and social welfare relief programs that characterized policies that were meant to address the serious problems that dominated the Great Depression [Erdmans 2007]. Their loyalty to Roosevelt's presidency and party lingered long after Roosevelt himself had gone, transferring that allegiance through the Truman presidency and beyond [Brozek 1985], [Bukowczyk 2009], [Greene 1980], [Pienkos A.T. 1978], [Renkiewicz 1973]. As a Catholic, John F. Kennedy received a plurality of the Poles' votes in 1960 after they had selected the popular Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952. As recently arrived immigrants, they usually supported the Democratic Party and the values it represented at the time [Pienkos D.E. 1976].

Beginning in the late 1970s, Polish American voters began to move to a more conservative direction while not necessarily joining the Republican Party, and at times voting for third party candidates as well [Pienkos D.E. 2015]. They chose Ronald Reagan for president in 1984 as well as George H. W. Bush in 1988, but moved to William Jefferson Clinton in 1992 due to his support of Polish NATO membership. George W. Bush then became their choice in 2000 but was followed by Democrat Barack Obama in 2008¹. However, partially due to the visa issue for Poles traveling to the US, Polish American voters selected Donald Trump in 2016. The final data for election 2020 from a national PIAST study indicate a strong support for Biden in the recent 2020 presidential election [Stecula 2022]. This election result is noteworthy as the reasons for the Biden election are not entirely clear but may be partially related to his Catholic religious preference as was the case for John F. Kennedy in 1960 [Brooks, Manza 1997].² One theme in the general trend of Democratic Party presidential voting is that Polish American voters have been influenced by policy issues critically important to them in their unique history, culture, and connection to Poland. A second theme is that Polish Americans have responded to their experiences in the United States, some of which are related to their ethnic identity as Polish immigrants, but others that are related to trends felt by Americans in general.

Several reasons for this shift to the right have been suggested by various scholars. First, as the years passed Polish Americans moved into the middle class as their education levels increased and they were able to secure higher paying jobs. Second,

¹ The PIAST Institute in Hamtramck, Michigan has conducted a number of Polish American studies of political participation over the years [Radzilowski, Stecula 2000], [Stecula, Radzilowski 2014].

² As a critical counterpoint to the idea of a distinctive tendency of Catholic voters to support Catholic candidates, see Jelen (2008) and McDermott (2009).

many Polish Americans continue to report Catholic faith. Catholicism is not just an individual devotion but a cultural centerpiece of the Polish American community, with church parishes playing a focal role in forging social connections and enabling mutual aid to this day. Polish Americans, particularly with Catholic identity, may have moved toward the Republican Party when it stressed positions that were of critical importance to them regarding cultural values around gender and sexuality, such as abortion, LGBT rights, and the separation of church life from civic and political life. That said, the centrality of Catholic identity among Polish Americans is a matter of debate. While some scholarly work has asserted that “Non-Catholic Poles in America never made up more than five percent of the total Polish-American population” and that non-Catholics emigrating from Poland to America did not identify as Poles per se [Radzikowski 2009], [Radzikowski 2015], responses to an interesting question in this ongoing nationally representative General Social Survey (GSS) indicate movement in another direction. In this question, respondents are asked to choose one and only one primary ethnic identity. Overall, 63.7% of respondents from 1972-2018 who identified themselves primary as of Polish ethnicity also indicated a Catholic faith (15.0% indicated they were Protestant, 9.4% Jewish, 9.1% no religion, and 2.8% other religion). This overall trend masks significant change: 73.1% of Polish American respondents reported Catholic religious identity in the 1970s, but this share dropped to just 51.1% among GSS respondents in the 2010s. This is not a simple Catholic vs. Protestant identification issue. Declining identification with the Catholic religious community may be one reason why Polish Americans as a voting group began to vote like other Americans, as later generations of Polish immigrants moved away from intimate knowledge and personal attachment to their country and culture of origin and more to typical American views. This area needs future serious scholarly attention as suggested in this study’s conclusions which in some respects may be limited due to sampling issues. Some scholars even question whether there is a distinct “Polish vote” today as there was in the twentieth century [Pienkos D.E. 2021]. Detailed discussions of these political linkages are presented in other articles cited in this paper.

STUDY DESIGN

Data for this study has been extracted from the General Social Survey (GSS), administered by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago with principal funding from the National Science Foundation [Smith et al. 2018]. The GSS is a non-panel survey from representative samples of the non-institutionalized population of the United States aged 18 and older; we draw from 32 waves of the survey beginning in 1972 and ending in 2018. More than 64,000 survey responses were gathered during this period, with a subset of 1,489 respondents who reported they most strongly identify with their Polish ancestry. This is a relatively small subset, and as a consequence our findings serve as description of this group and generalizations to all Polish Americans in the United States are limited. However, this is the largest

and most representative survey of Polish American political behavior we are aware of, and we hope that this analysis will generate important future research questions. For this study, these are our research questions:

1. Does the partisan affiliation of Polish Americans change over time from 1972-2018? How does this trend compare to that of the entire American GSS sample?
2. Does the pattern of presidential election voting by Polish Americans change over time from the 1968 election to the 2016 election? How does this trend compare to that of the entire American GSS sample?

The variables we use in our analysis are coded as follows:

- Democratic Party affiliation (0=No, 1=Yes)
- Presidential choice in the previous presidential election among voters (0=Non Democratic Party candidate, 1=Democratic Party candidate)
- Who the respondent would have voted for if they had voted, among non-voters (0=Non-Democratic Party candidate, 1=Democratic Party candidate, 2=Don't know)
- Catholic religious identification (0= No, 1=Yes)
- Years of age
- Years of education
- Income above median income for the year (0= No, 1=Yes)
- Female self-reported sex (0=No, 1=Yes)
- White self-reported race (0=No, 1=Yes)
- Size of residential community (in thousands of people)

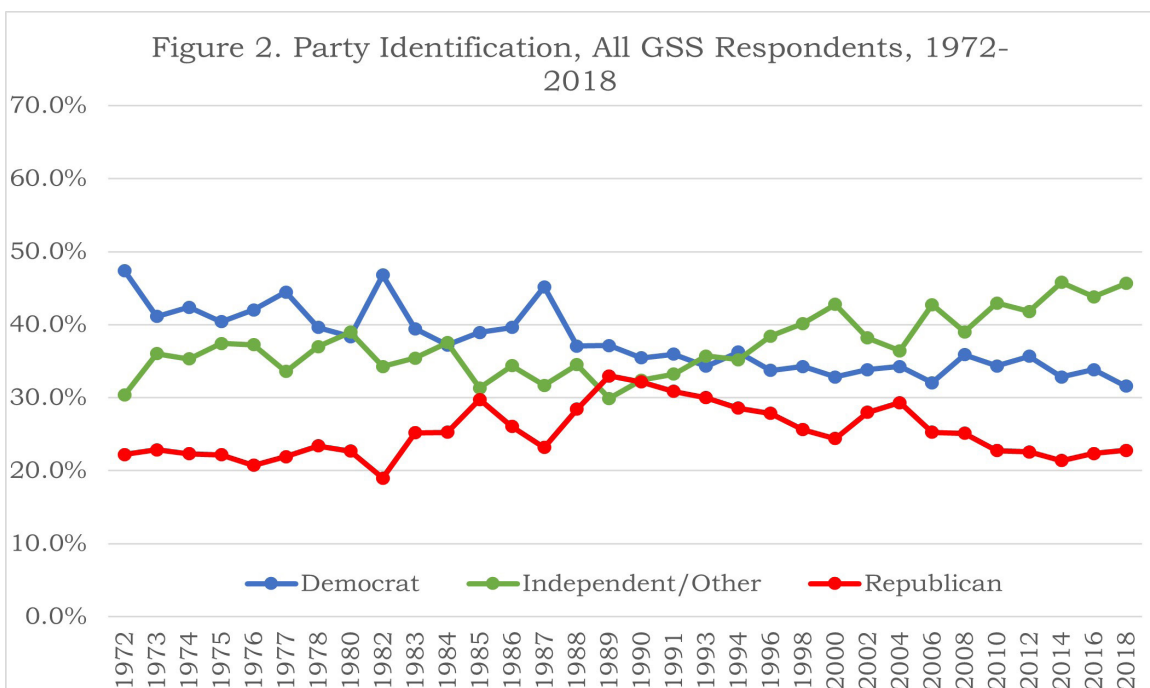
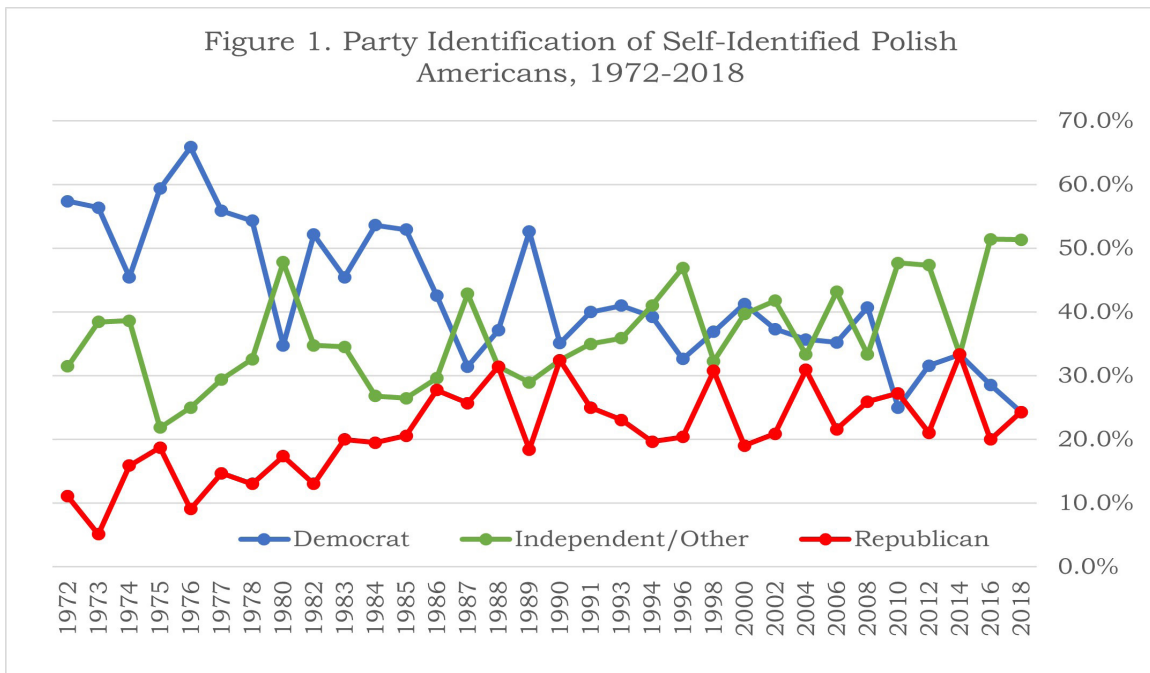
Using this data, we first generate figures to exhibit the trends in political behavior among Polish Americans across time and compare them to trends among all American respondents regardless of ethnic identification. Next, we employ multivariate logistic regression to consider a broader set of covariates that might affect the association between Polish ethnic identification and political behavior in the United States. Does a unique voting trend for Polish Americans persist when other important factors are accounted for?

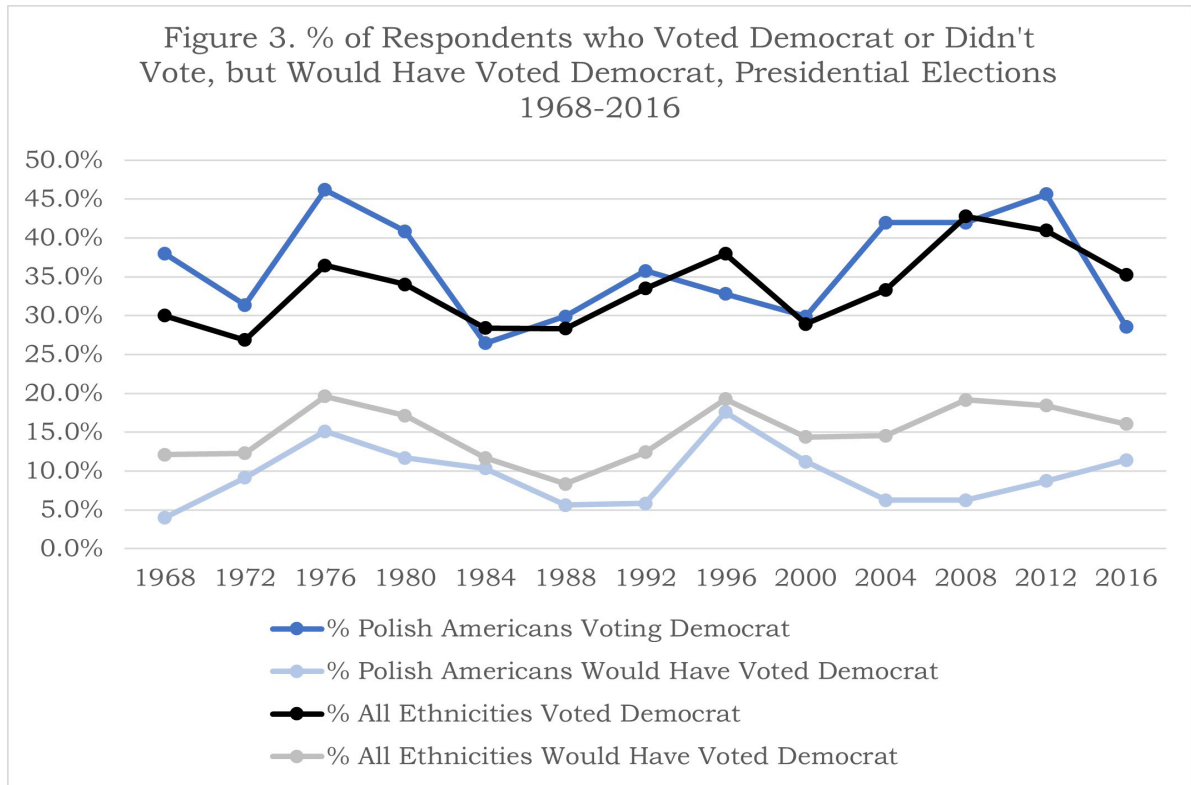
RESULTS

1.1 Bivariate Trends

Figure 1 displays trends in party identification over time by GSS year for self-identified Polish Americans, and Figure 2 displays the same trends among all GSS respondents. The trend for Polish Americans contains some similarities to the trend for all GSS respondents, namely a decline in Democratic Party affiliation and an increase in third-party or independent affiliation. However, two important differences are also evident. First, an increase in Republican Party affiliation is evident for Polish Americans across the period, while for all GSS respondents Republican Party affiliation increases for a time but then declines to early-1970s levels. Second, while levels of Democratic Party registration are roughly equal for Polish Americans and all GSS respondents by the late 2010s, they were quite a bit higher for Polish Americans

than for all respondents in the 1970s. Democratic Party affiliation fell further, from a greater height, among Polish Americans. Figure 3 compares trends for a different outcome: voting for Democratic Party presidential candidates. These trends extend backward to 1968 and forward only to 2016 because respondents are asked to describe their most recent presidential voting behavior. Across the years, similarity between self-identified Polish Americans and all Americans is apparent, especially in the mid-1980s and afterward. While from the late 1960s through the 1980 election Polish Americans appear more likely to turn out and vote Democratic in presidential elections, since then the Polish American voting trend, at least as captured by the General Social Survey, roughly resembles the trend for Americans overall.





1.2 Multivariate Analysis

Figures in the previous section indicate simple tendencies across time, but there are a number of other factors that impact party affiliation and voting. These factors are controlled for in the multivariate logistic regressions summarized in Table 1 and Table 2. In each table, Model 1 considers only the effect of being Polish American. Model 2 adds Catholicism, high income, education, sex, whiteness, age, and size of residential community as control variables. Model 3 introduces additional variables that track changes across time and also reports any significant interactions between Polish American status and other variables. The effects in Tables 1 and 2 are based on odds ratios, which describe the odds of an event happening given a one-unit increase in some independent variable, divided by the odds of an event happening if there is no increase in that independent variable. For instance, the “+31.5% odds” result for “Female (1=Yes)” in Model 3 of Table 2 indicates that a female’s odds of voting for a Democratic Party candidate are 31.5% higher than the odds of a male who is in other respects the same as that female.

Model 1 of Table 1 indicates that when other variables are not controlled for, having a Polish American ethnic identity increases the odds of being a Democrat by 24%. When all other variables are controlled for in Model 3, however, Polish American identity increases the odds of being a Democrat by a much higher 61.6%. Polish ethnic identity nearly cancels out the 69.6% drop in odds of being a Democrat that comes with whiteness in Model 3, suggesting that even controlling for the passage of time, Polish

ethnic identity cannot simply be reduced to another form of American white racial identity. As with all Americans, Polish Americans who live in larger towns, are older, female, have lower income and less education have greater odds of being a Democrat. The 63.7% of Polish Americans who report Catholic religious identity experience an additional 26.4% increase in the odds of being a Democrat; because ethnicity and religion are controlled for, the distinctive effect of Polish ethnic identity cannot simply be reduced to the effect of Catholicism. Finally, while all GSS respondents experience a decline in Democratic Party affiliation from the 1970s to the 2010s, Polish Americans experience a larger drop, confirming the bivariate trend noted above.

Table 1. Effect of Independent Variables on the Odds of Democratic Party Affiliation (1=Yes) Among All Respondents to the General Social Survey, 1972-2018

Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Polish American (1=Yes)	+24.0% odds **	+40.7% odds **	+61.6% odds **
Catholic (1=Yes)		+26.4% odds **	+26.4% odds**
Education (years)		-2.0% odds/year **	-0.6% odds/year **
Income>Median (1=Yes)		-6.7% odds **	-5.3% odds **
Female (1=Yes)		+30.3% odds **	+30.3% odds **
White (1=Yes)		-67.1% odds **	-69.6% odds **
Age (years)		+1.2% odds/year **	+1.3% odds/year **
Size (thousands)		+0.007% odds/thousand **	+0.006% odds/thousand**
GSS Year from 1987-2002 (1=Yes)			-28.4% odds compared to 1972-1986 **
GSS Year from 2003-2018 (1=Yes)			-40.8% odds compared to 1972-1986 **
Polish American * GSS Year from 1987-2002 (1=Yes)			-20.4% odds for Polish Americans compared to 1972-1986 +
Polish American * GSS Year from 2003-2018 (1=Yes)			-28.1% odds for Polish Americans compared to 1972-1986 *

Notes: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, + $p < .10$, $N = 64142$ (672 cases with missing values). Model 3 features includes interactions between Polish ethnic identity and all other independent variables; only significant interactions reported. Removal of non-significant interactions from model does not affect substantive effect or statistical significance of other variables.

As with partisanship, the odds of voting for a Democratic Party candidate are higher for Polish Americans than for others, and the effect of Polish ethnicity increases when other variables are controlled for. As with all Americans, Polish Americans who live in larger towns, are older, female, and have lower income have greater odds of voting for a Democrat. For all Americans in Model 3, education has no statistically significant impact on odds of vote, but for Polish Americans, higher education drastically lowers the odds of voting for a Democrat for president, cutting the odds by 6.2% for each additional year of education. Catholicism increases the odds of voting for a Democrat, independently of the Polish ethnic effect. Finally, as with partisanship it appears that

the odds of voting for a Democratic presidential candidate have diminished over time compared to the levels of the 1968-1984 elections. However, there is no statistically significant interaction between time period and Polish ethnicity. This implies that the decline in Democratic presidential voting among Polish Americans is of a similar magnitude to the decline among all respondents.

Table 2. Effect of Independent Variables on the Odds of Voting for a Democratic Party Candidate (1=Yes) Among Respondents to the General Social Survey Voting in Presidential Elections from 1968-2016

Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Polish American (1=Yes)	+27.2% odds **	+46.3% odds **	+44.1% odds **
Catholic (1=Yes)		+38.5% odds **	+37.5% odds **
Education (years)		-1.4% odds/year **	-0.2% odds/year
Income>Median (1=Yes)		-20.6% odds **	-19.7% odds **
Female (1=Yes)		+31.0% odds **	+31.5% odds **
White (1=Yes)		-80.6% odds **	-81.5% odds **
Age (years)		+0.6% odds/year **	+0.7% odds/year **
Size (thousands)		+0.01% odds/thousand **	+0.01% odds/thousand **
Presidential Elections from 1988-1996 (1=Yes)			-23.6% odds compared to 1968-1984 elections **
Presidential Elections from 2000-2016 (1=Yes)			-30.8% odds compared to 1968-1984 elections **
Polish American * Education (1=Yes to both conditions)			-6.2% odds/year for Polish Americans **

Notes: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, $N = 40096$ (303 cases with missing values). Model 3 features includes interactions between Polish ethnic identity and all other independent variables; only significant interactions reported. Removal of non-significant interactions from model does not affect substantive effect or statistical significance of other variables.

CONCLUSIONS

Our main conclusions from this analysis of the General Social Survey from the University of Chicago (1972-2018) are summarized below. Each finding generates questions for future research.

1. Finding: We reaffirm previous research that Polish Americans distinctly tend toward Democratic identity in affiliation and voting, and we extend this research by finding that this tendency persists even when other factors are accounted for. We conclude this through multivariate analyses that allow us to control for religion, education, income, race, sex, age, time period, and size of place. Independent of all these other factors, being Polish remains a significant predictor of Democratic Party affiliation and presidential voting.

Question: What explains the distinct Polish American political tradition, if it is independent of these factors?

2. Finding: The NORC data analysis in this study reaffirms research that Catholic religion is related to Polish American voter choice during presidential elections. However, the effect of Catholicism for Polish Americans is different in neither direction nor magnitude from the effect of Catholicism for other American ethnicities.

Question: How does the experience of religion interact with Polish ethnicity for the nearly 2/5 of Polish Americans across the entire period and the nearly 1/2 of Polish Americans in the last decade who report some non-Catholic religious identity?

3. Finding: The distinctive tendency for Polish Americans to identify as members of the Democratic Party and vote for Democratic Party presidential candidates declined from its high point in the 1970s period to its lowest point in the current period. The decline of Democratic Party affiliation occurred even faster for Polish Americans than for all Americans. The decline of Democratic presidential voting occurred at the same pace for Polish Americans and other Americans.

Question: As the decades since the first large wave of Polish American immigration continue to mount, will Polish American ethnic identity continue to be a salient feature of political decision-making?

4. Finding: Overall, our study reaffirms previous findings regarding Polish American political participation, even though our sample is small compared to the total GSS sample.

Question: Given the 2020 presidential election results favoring the democratic candidate Biden, will Polish Americans continue to vote Democratic in future elections and/or follow national voter trends in presidential elections [Sand 2022]?

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