

Polonia głosuje 2008 Polonia votes 2008



Polonia and the elections: why we matter?

DOMINIK STECUŁA

The presidential elections of 2008 are approaching at a fast pace. Through the lengthy process of the primaries, both major parties elected their candidates, based on their stance on multiple important issues, “electability,” and a variety of other factors. We saw candidates catering to the voters, taking positions that would make them more popular with different groups, trying to appeal to the widest possible base. What we didn’t see, however, were the candidates making a special appeal to the Polish-American vote. We heard a lot about, and from, Latinos, Arabs, Jews, and other ethnic groups, but somehow the Polish voice was not heard or listened to in the public debate.

It is very unfortunate that the fifth largest ethnic group in the country is virtually nonexistent on the political map of the United States. We are invisible. Yet in 2006, 10,024,683 Americans declared Polish ancestry. Assuming at least a 10 percent undercount, 3.7 percent of the population of the USA is of Polish background. We are smaller in numbers only to the German, Irish, English, and Italian ancestries. It is worth noting that those groups are “old immigrations,” already assimilated to the American culture, with a relatively small amount of “new blood” coming from Europe annually, unlike Poles, who consistently keep coming in relatively large numbers. Tens of thousands have continued to come each decade. Since 1918, about 533,310 Poles have arrived as immigrants, while 297,855 others came as refugees and asylum seekers between 1940 and 1992.

Despite acculturation, Poles are still one of the largest groups in the country that continues to speak the ancestral language at home. Millions into the fifth generation still maintain and practice Polish customs and traditions. Around 500,000 of the Poles currently in America were born in Poland, which accounts for about 5 percent of the Polish population in the United States. But even the Poles born in the United States oftentimes speak Polish at home, as demonstrated by the fact that around 8 percent of Poles in the USA speak Polish at home.

Despite the fact that the Polish population is, in general, very much attached to the Po-



Photo: Archive

ABOUT PIAST INSTITUTE

The Piast Institute, a national institute for Polish and Polish-American affairs, is the only independent Polish-American think tank and research center in the United States. We strongly believe that Polonia is not a fading remnant of a European culture, but a dynamic, new creation by Polish immigrants and their progeny in the United States. Our major goal is to build the new Polonia of the 21st century. We immediately recognized Polonia Votes 2008 as an initiative worth supporting and helping to expand. As one of 59 official U.S. Census Information Centers in the United States, and the only one in the nation dedicated to a European-American population, we can provide the necessary demographic and socio-economic, as well as historical information that might help the Polonia Votes 2008 initiative. We encourage other organizations and individuals to get interested in the initiative and help it grow. For more information on the Piast Institute, please visit our work-in-progress website at: piastinstitute.org, or read about us on Wikipedia. You can also contact us at: (313)664-0321, or via e-mail at: cic@piastinstitute.org.

lish culture, Poles are functioning well indeed in American society. In most aspects, Poles are doing better than the average American. Poles are more educated than average Americans (30 percent of Poles have a Bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 24 percent of average Americans). Our median household incomes, median family incomes, and per capita incomes are all significantly higher than average. Our homes are worth more than the average American home, and we are more likely to own a house than other Americans. We are also 50 percent less likely to live below the poverty level compared to the average in America.

Historically speaking, Poles in America were always involved politically. Poles were active both locally and nationally. In local politics, ethnic lo-

yalty often superseded party affiliation (In heavily Democratic Polish Buffalo, for example, the Polish vote went Republican twice to support Polish mayoral candidates). At the beginning of the twentieth century, Poles nationally supported the Democratic Party. Support was around 60 percent, soaring in 1928 in support of Governor Al Smith, Catholic and veteran, for president. Poles chose the Democratic party because of its traditional importance of economic, political, and social support that, in their eyes, state and society had to the community. Main objectives of public policy, therefore, should be to alleviate poverty and social distress. Polls consistently showed that until the 1980s, when Polish-Americans showed a higher support from any other major ethnic group, for the idea that government should

do all in its power to eradicate poverty. After 1980, polling by ethnic group on such questions virtually ceased. The “family wage” was a policy that was very popular with Polish-Americans, reflecting both an economic as well as social policy orientation. The Democratic Party platform expressed similar opinions, resulting in large support from the Polish community until the 1970s. After 1968, the Democratic Party made a major strategic decision to reconstitute its coalition within which Catholic ethnic voters were no longer to play a key role. Gradually, the Democratic Party also adopted the libertarianism of the Republicans in social matters, moving away from the more humanitarian approach that Polish-Americans found culturally and religiously attractive.

The Republican Party, on the other hand, was historically seen as a vessel of profit-driven industrialists, Drys, and Protestants, whose philosophy was laissez-faire capitalism and libertarian individualism, with little regard for the role of the community. However, after World War II, loyalties switched. Many Poles felt that President Roosevelt betrayed Po-

land. Angered by the Yalta Conference, many members of Polonia were attracted by the Republican strong anti-Communism movement although, in the mid-1980s, a majority of Polish-Americans disapproved of the Reagan welfare cuts. However, the Republican adoption of older communal values under the name of “family values” did attract Polish-American voters, at least at the national level.

Generally speaking, the majority of the Polish vote since 1932 at the national level, except in the elections of 1956 (Eisenhower), 1972 (Nixon), 1984 (Reagan), and 2004 (Bush), went to the Democratic Party. At the local level and in Congressional elections, the majority of the Polish vote still goes Democratic. Currently, however, the Polish vote does not have a safe home. About 45 – 50 percent seem loyal to the Democrats, with about a 10 – 15 percent swing between the parties, with the remainder having moved into the Republican column. This is the result of the demographic changes in Polonia, indifference of the parties to the Polish vote, and philosophical changes in the parties’ platforms, as noted above.

In terms of elected officials, we currently have six representatives (from Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Indiana) in the 110th Congress and three senators (from Maryland, Alaska, and Nevada). The highest representation of Polish-Americans was achieved in 1958, with 15 representatives. In terms of the Senate, the current representation is the highest ever. Only one other Polish-American senator was elected, that being Edmund Muskie, in 1958, from Maine.

With this upcoming election, we can finally grow in importance again, to the level that we deserve. The first step is to appear prominently in the public arena and to have coherent positions on issues, especially those that deal with the life of our communities in America. We also need to be able to raise funds to support candidates and policies we favor. It is only then that we can expect the candidates to meet with our leaders and discuss our issues.

To start, we need to let people know we have votes and we can mobilize them. Campaigns will soon be selling and distributing, “Polish-Americans for Obama,” or “Polish-Americans for McCain,” bumper stickers. It is time for them to fight for our votes. With initiatives like Polonia Votes 2008, we can make history happen. Many Polish-Americans already pledged to vote in the November elections, and the official race has barely begun. Our community has the potential and the political drive. We also have one other critical factor that the candidates care about – geographical location. Our heaviest concentrations are in New York, Michigan, Illinois, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Wisconsin, California, Florida, Ohio, and Massachusetts. Many of those states are considered crucial swing states. Together, they make up 43 percent of the Electoral College. With all that on our side, and a great initiative like Polonia Votes 2008, all we have to do as Polonia is live up to our potential. □

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