

**THE POLISH AMERICAN VOTE IN THE 2024 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION:  
HISTORY, EVIDENCE, IDENTITY**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the Polish American vote in the 2024 US presidential election. First, it examines the history of the Polish American vote and considers whether there is still such a thing as a Polish American electorate. Then, utilizing a theory of identity priming, we test whether then-Vice President Kamala Harris's direct appeal to Polish American voters worked. The sample utilized consists of 1,278 students at a large Midwestern university, of whom nearly ten percent identify as Polish American. The results suggest some significant political differences between the Polish American and other respondents, including reactions to the Harris appeal. The paper concludes with a discussion of how the Polish American identity is maintained, through a theory of latent ethnicity.

**Keywords:** Polish Americans; Voting Behavior; Elections; Identity; Ethnicity

## **Introduction**

August 10, 2025 was the final day of the Sweetest Heart of Mary Pierogi Festival in Detroit, Michigan, USA. The congregation is one of myriad ethnic parishes that once thrived in Detroit but have lost members as their neighborhoods emptied due to suburbanization, urban renewal, and multiple other reasons. But a committed group of parishioners keep the festival going, and it draws surprisingly large crowds to eat Polish food (including the eponymous dumplings, hand-made by the parishioners), drink Polish beer, and tour the ornate church. The Wawel Polish dance troupe, now in its 60<sup>th</sup> year, performs folk dances for the enthusiastic crowd. A band plays polkas, waltzes and obereks, as well as a large number of pop and rock tunes. And, the location being Detroit, a fair number of Motown hits are played as well. Many attendees wear Detroit Tigers baseball shirts that are distributed during Polish American Night at the ballpark, which mix the team's old English D logo with the red and white of the Polish flag. There is a vendor tent with Polish amber jewelry available, among other ethnic and religious items. Some attendees even sport tattoos of Polish symbols, like the eagle. Multiple generations enjoy the festivities; the energy level is high, and perhaps a little beer-fueled.

Does this version of ethnicity mean anything beyond the creation of enjoyable weekend experiences for people who still identify as Polish American? Are there any non-entertainment consequences that come from these symbolic and performative ethnicity displays and activities? Does being Polish American, an identity distinct from, but related to, both Polish and American identity, influence vote choice in presidential elections among those who choose to identify as Polish American?

This article examines the Polish American vote in the 2024 US presidential election. It begins with an examination of identity priming literature, then moves on to the history of the Polish American vote, as well as the debate over whether there even is such a thing as the Polish American vote anymore. Then it examines the conditions under which an appeal to the Polish American vote in 2024 may have affected a sample of young Polish Americans in Northwest Ohio, as well as the presidential election results in one Pennsylvania County with a high percentage of Polish American voters. Finally, it discusses what the 2024 results tell us about the current condition of the Polish American ethnic identity, through the lenses of latent ethnicity and identity priming theories.

### **Identity and Vote Choice**

The great historian of the Polish American community John Bukowczyk wrote that as Polish Americans moved away from voting for the Democratic Party in support of Republican Ronald Reagan, they did so not as Polish Americans but as “white” Americans. They did so, “because their ethnicity had expired” (Bukowczyk, 1987/2008, p. 137). While it could be argued that such a conclusion about the ending of their ethnic identity is overly broad and perhaps even a little harsh, the comment does recognize that American voters embody a number of identities that influence how they vote in presidential elections, and that these identities can sometimes be in conflict with one another. Campaigns must find ways to activate the right identity to get voters to see issues and candidates’ positions on them in ways that are favorable to their candidate.

Druckman (2022, p.13) argues that “People often base political decisions on their partisan or social identities (Achen & Bartels 2016). Indeed, the implications for one's identity group are

often a crucial consideration when one forms an attitude. It is thus not surprising that speakers often seek to activate or pander to particular identities.” But, of course, people have different identities that can complement each other in vote choice and opinion formation, or challenge and even contradict each other. Samara Klar (2013, p. 1108) argues that “Both scholarly evidence and common intuition tell us that individuals each hold multiple identities at one time that are, on occasion, associated with competing interests – and this may be more true now than it ever has been before.”

Tajfel defines identity as “that part of the individuals’ self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (1981, p. 255). Klar argues that there are three ways an identity can be primed by a candidate or a campaign. It can be merely mentioned; it can be connected to policy relevance; and, finally, it can be used to cause a member of the group to feel threatened. Intersectionality is a term commonly used to describe the complex interaction of identities such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation (Hancock, 2007, p. 64). Hancock is, however, keen to point out that the categories are not the only ones that may interact. For the analysis of the 2024 election presented here, identities such as Polish American ethnicity, gender, partisanship, ideology and others will be considered.

### **The Polish American Vote**

Officially, there are around nine million Polish Americans (Polish Population by State 2025), which is just under 3% of the total population (American Community Survey: People Reporting Ancestry). This is likely an undercount, since the ancestors of many people who identify as Polish Americans came to the US when Poland had been carved up by its neighbors

Prussia, Russia, and Austria in the late 18th century and did not exist as an independent country (finally being reestablished as an independent country as a consequence of World War I). Polish Americans are concentrated in a handful of states: Wisconsin (where they account for more than 8% of the state's population), Michigan (8%), and Pennsylvania (nearly 6%) have the greatest share. That said, there are Polish Americans living in every presidential election swing state<sup>1</sup> such as Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Michigan as indicated above – but also including even Arizona, North Carolina, Georgia and Nevada – where the outcome of elections is often decided by razor-thin margins, and where every vote truly matters.

Undoubtedly, there used to be a strong Polish American electorate in the decades during and after the great waves of migration of Poles to the US around the turn of the last century (Pienkos, 1976). Prior to World War II and the Great Depression, Polish Americans are believed to have switched between support for Democratic and Republican presidential candidates, based both on economic issues and on matters related to US policy toward the newly re-formed Polish state (Kantowicz, 1975). This was the period when many Polish Americans identified more as Poles living in America, since for many of them the sojourn was in fact temporary, as they returned to Poland after some time in America. It is also not surprising that issues related to Poland would be important to the most recent arrivals, and there would be less of a distinction between what they cared about concerning Poland, and what Poles in Poland cared about. This would change as assimilation increased and the community committed to the new country more than the old.

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<sup>1</sup> US presidential elections are not decided by the popular vote. Instead they are decided by mostly winner take all elections in the 50 states and District of Columbia where the 538 member Electoral College is chosen. To win the presidency a candidate needs a majority of Electoral College votes, which is now 270. Presidential elections in most states are not competitive, however there are a handful of states that are highly contested. These states receive the lion's share of campaign resources, including candidate and surrogate visits, as well as advertising money. Voters from these states are, quite simply, more important than voters from other states.

During the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Polish Americans began strongly backing the Democratic Party because that party supported their unions and successfully managed US involvement in World War II. Polish American blue-collar workers were an important element of the New Deal coalition, but anti-communism and anger over the Allies betrayal of Poland at the close of the war may have persuaded many of them to back Eisenhower in 1952 and 1956, although the reasons for Polish American voters supporting Eisenhower are debated (Wagner, 1964). Support for the Catholic John F. Kennedy and then his former vice president Lyndon B. Johnson returned the Polish American vote to the Democratic side.

The culture wars begun in the 1960s, Ronald Reagan's social conservatism and anticommunism in the 1980s, and the economic and cultural integration of Polish Americans into suburbia challenged the connection between Polish Americans and the Democratic Party. As Polish Americans abandoned the old urban neighborhoods for the greener pastures of the suburbs and came closer to achieving educational and economic parity with other white Americans, some began voting like other Americans to such an extent that Bill Clinton's pollster Dick Morris claimed, "Neither I nor the president ever believed there is such a thing as a Polish vote. There is a white vote, a black vote, a Jewish vote, and a Hispanic vote."

According to Gurnack and Cook (2021), "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 2008." (p.31)

In terms of the Polish American vote today, such as it may be affecting the outcome of a US presidential election, Pienkos (2021) argues that two conditions must be met. First, the issue of the fate of Poland must be raised during the campaign and also, the election has to be close. It may be worth considering one more threshold variable, namely that there must be a group of voters who care about Poland so much that they would actually factor such a concern into their decision about for whom to vote. This could be non-Polish American voters who place foreign policy and international relations at the top of the agenda and support a strong Poland as a buffer against Russian expansionist tendencies. More likely, it would be voters who identify in some ways as Polish American and therefore care about Poland. But do they care enough about Poland for it to matter more than their partisan and ideological dispositions, gender, and concerns about other domestic issues, such as the condition of the nation's economy?

Presidential candidates continue to vie for the Polish American vote, suggesting that at least on the margins, campaigns believe doing so could help their candidate win. In 2016 Donald Trump spoke before the Polish American Congress. He also promised to add Poland to the visa waiver program, something long desired by both Poles and the Polish American community. He kept this promise, but Joe Biden is believed to have carried the Polish American vote in 2020, and the reasons for that remain unclear according to Gurnack and Cook, who wrote "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)" (p. 31).

In the 2020 presidential campaign, Republicans attempted to generate controversy about then-Vice President Joe Biden, a man known for more than occasional political gaffes, who had said during an interview with the *New York Times*, "We stopped showing up at the Polish

American club,” and, “we all went to you, the really smart people. We had a new kind of coalition we were putting together. College-educated women and college men and boom, boom, boom and so on.” (“Joe Biden”). Jackson (2024) wrote, “Supporters of the former Vice President argued that the intent of Biden’s remarks was to be critical of the Democrats for ignoring their ethnic, working class base, and the attempt to make it a scandal never caught on. But the attempt to make it into an issue indicates some Republicans in 2020 believed Polish Americans could be motivated to vote for Trump if they could be persuaded that Democrats had insulted them.”

In the 2024 presidential campaign, Vice President Kamala Harris made an explicit play for the Polish American vote during her sole debate with Donald Trump. Harris said, “tell the 800,000 Polish Americans right here in Pennsylvania how quickly you would give up for the sake of favor and what you think is a friendship with what is known to be a dictator who would eat you for lunch.” (“Harris' Suggestion”). Harris, of course, was referring to Trump’s relationship with Russian dictator Vladimir Putin, including Trump’s public comment to NATO allies that he “would encourage” Russia “to do whatever the hell they want” to any NATO member that did not contribute sufficiently to collective security. (“Trump says”). The campaign organized a Polish Americans for Harris Zoom call and sent Polish American surrogates into swing states. Democrats and affiliated groups ran ads about Ukraine aimed at Polish Americans in Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin. The ads evoked powerful images for the Polish diaspora, including the Trumpeter of Kraków, and the unofficial Polish motto, “For our freedom and yours.”

According to Gurnack and Cook (2021), 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. (p. 31)

This links to the concept of identity priming discussed above. Polish Americans embody a complex set of identities, such as their Polish American identity, other racial/ethnic identities, gender, partisanship, ideology, and so on. Central questions of this research include: How do Polish Americans vote when they are thinking of themselves as Polish Americans? Is it still worth it for campaigns and candidates to make specific appeals to Polish American voters? What happens when they do? Conveniently, the Harris campaign created a natural experiment through their direct appeal to Polish American voters.

Some data on the 2024 Polish American vote occurs naturally, in the form of election results. Other data can be generated through a survey of Polish American voters. After an examination of the results in 2024 in one particularly Polish American-heavy county, we examine whether Polish Americans were motivated by the direct appeal made by then-Vice President Kamala Harris.

### **Luzerne County, Pennsylvania: A Polish American Bellwether?**

Luzerne County Pennsylvania has long been considered something of a bellwether for explaining the Polish American vote. In the past, it was much easier to tell how Polish Americans voted because the population was so concentrated in certain precincts that all scholars had to do was check the results in these places to know how the Polish American community had voted. As the neighborhoods emptied of Polish Americans and diversified, that is no longer possible. And the suburban communities to which the Polish American community moved contain a diversity

of ethnicities such that individual blocks may contain multiple ethnicities. Today the only county in the US where a plurality of residents (around 22%) considers themselves Polish American is said to be Luzerne County in Pennsylvania. Located in Northeastern Pennsylvania, the county is home to about 325,000 people. The overwhelming majority of the county's population is white, and besides Polish Americans, there are large numbers of Italian, German, Irish and Slovak Americans (Demographics).

In 2016, 57.9% of the electorate in Luzerne County voted for Donald Trump, while 38.6% voted for Hillary Clinton. In 2020, 56.6% voted for Trump, while 42.3% voted for Joe Biden. In 2024, 59% voted for Trump, while 39.9% voted for Kamala Harris. What does this tell us about the Polish American vote? Not much, unfortunately, because we do not know if the changes from year to year were due to the behavior of the one fifth of voters who are Polish American or those of other ethnic backgrounds. It does show, however, that a male presidential candidate outperformed women candidates against Trump in the county. The fact that the only presidential election Donald Trump has ever lost was against another old man, and that the two he won were against women is a topic worthy of consideration, but beyond the scope of this article.

### **Ohio Survey Data**

Between 27 March 2025 and 15 April 2025, the Democracy and Public Policy Research Network at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) in Ohio conducted a survey of all full-time students at BGSU who were over the age of 18. This resulted in responses from approximately 1,278 students, of whom fully 9.9% identify as Polish American. The political beliefs of this group of respondents can tell us something about how an admittedly very particular group of

Polish Americans think about politics: young Polish Americans, primarily from Ohio and engaged in higher education at either the graduate or undergraduate level. While the limitations of this data are substantial, there are benefits, too. The data indicate the actual preferences of eligible young voters who answered in the affirmative when asked if they consider themselves Polish American. However, given that the sample includes only students from one comprehensive regional university in the Midwest, generalizations from the data will be appropriately limited.<sup>2</sup>

Let us start with some basic demographic characteristics of the Polish American sample in the BGSU survey. About 90% of them identify as white, while 53% are female, 37% are male, and six percent are gendervariant/non-conforming. About 96% are between the ages of 18 and 25, while the plurality (38%) are taking a major in the College of Arts and Sciences, 22% are in Education, and 13% are in either Business or Health and Human Services. If we count the immigrant generation as the first generation Polish American, the majority of the respondents are either fourth generation (51%) or fifth generation (34%). A little over 79% voted in the 2024 presidential election, and most voted for Kamala Harris.

### **Young Polish Americans: Partisanship, Ideology, and 2024 Presidential Vote**

There are some interesting differences between the BGSU Polish American respondents and the others (what others?) with regard to political beliefs and behavior. Let us start with party preference, as presented in Table 1.

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<sup>2</sup> BGSU is a selective university located in Northwest Ohio with about 20,000 students. The overwhelming majority of the students are white, and the majority are women. Until recently, Ohio had been a swing state in US presidential elections, and the county in which BGSU is located was a swing county in a swing state. However, Donald Trump carried the state by eight points in 2016 and 2020, then by 11 points in 2024. An analysis of how Ohio and Michigan (a state with a large Polish American population) have diverged politically is available here: <https://collected.jcu.edu/jep/vol28/iss1/2/>.

	Democratic	Republican	Independent/Unaffiliated	Another Party	Total
Polish American	37%	28%	32%	3%	100%
Not Polish American	39%	20%	37%	4%	100%
Total	39%	21%	36%	4%	100%
Chi-Square (3) = 5.090, Sig. (2-tailed) = .165					

The Polish American respondents are slightly less likely to consider themselves Democrats (37% to 39%) and quite a bit more likely to consider themselves Republicans (28% to 20%). While the relationship is not statistically significant at traditional levels of significance, it still suggests these young Polish Americans are a bit more Republican, less Democratic, and less unaffiliated.

Gender and Polish American identity may be in competition here. Women in the sample overall are more than twice as likely as men to identify as Democrats (48% to 23%). So, what is a Polish American female respondent to do? Identify as a Democrat because of her identity as a young woman, or go Republican because of being Polish American, as well as potentially Catholic? Likely these decisions are made based on the closeness to the voter of the issues in question. Reproductive rights were a very important issue in the 2024 presidential election, with 66% saying it was either extremely important or very important (Brenan, 2024). According to analysis of the 2022 US elections performed by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University, “Young men and women were about as likely to say abortion should be legal. But young women, who are often more directly impacted by abortion restrictions, ranked it as a higher priority: 56% compared to 36% for young men (“The

Abortion Election”).” Could a concern for Poland be more important than something as personal as reproductive rights? These partly identity-based choices are what voters must make when deciding which candidate to support.

Now let us look at ideology. Forty-four percent of Polish Americans consider themselves very liberal or liberal, while 49% of the rest of the respondents do. On the other hand, 24% of Polish American respondents consider themselves conservative or very conservative, while only 19% of the other respondents do. These differences are not even close to being statistically significant, however. Still, the differences do comport with evidence gathered by previous scholars suggesting Polish Americans are more socially conservative than others, even when they were still a reliable bloc within the Democratic Party’s coalition. Or could it be the Catholicism, which unfortunately this survey did not measure? At the same time, if Catholicism is more prevalent among Polish Americans and that makes them more conservative, could it not be argued that being Polish American leads to being more conservative, at least indirectly: Polish American >>>> Catholic >>>> Conservative?

In terms of 2024 presidential vote, 50% of Polish Americans voted for Kamala Harris, while 54% of the other respondents did; about 33% of Polish Americans voted for Trump, while only 25% of the others did. This relationship has a chi-square value of 5.024, and a two tailed significance of .170. Given that less than 40% of Polish American respondents consider themselves Democrats, the fact that Harris received nearly half of Polish American votes is interesting and worthy of further inquiry. Again, it may be a matter of contested identities. The 54% of overall respondents who report voting for Harris exactly matches the 54% of 18-24 year olds who reported having voted for Harris in the CNN Exit Polls (“Election 2024: Exit Polls”). The Harris campaign did much more to motivate young voters and activate their identity as

young people or college students through issues like reproductive freedom, college affordability, celebrity endorsements, and appearances in non-traditional media than they did to activate their Polish American identity, and these results suggest those activities paid off. Perhaps the direct appeal to Polish American identity that the Harris campaign made was not intended for younger voters, whom the Harris campaign believed would mostly be motivated by other issues.

### Young Polish Americans and Harris' Statement

Where some differences really emerge, however, is concerning the statement Kamala Harris made during the 2024 debate with Donald Trump. The then-Vice President said, “Why don’t you tell the 800,000 Polish Americans right here in Pennsylvania how quickly you would give up for the sake of favor, and what you think is a friendship, with what is known to be a dictator who would eat you for lunch?” Respondents were asked their level of agreement with the statement, and statistically significant differences appeared between Polish American and other respondents, as presented in Table 2.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Polish American	35%	16%	17%	11%	21%	100%
Not Polish American	27%	25%	23%	12%	14%	100%
Total	27%	24%	22%	12%	15%	100%
Chi-Square (4) = 12.083, Sig. (2-tailed) = .017						

The pattern is clear: Compared with other respondents, Polish Americans are much more likely to strongly agree with the statement (35% to 27%) or strongly disagree with it (21% to

14%). Interestingly, they are less likely to only agree with it as well (16% to 25%) or to be neutral about it (17% to 23%). These differences are statistically significant but require some substantive interpretation.

First, the statement contains each of the three elements Klar identified for appeals to identity to work: it mentions the identity; it highlights the policy relevance of the group; and it suggests that the identity group is threatened. Based on this, if ever an appeal to identity should have worked, this is the one. However, the comment is not a particularly clean or clear statement, which makes interpreting the results more difficult. Given that the statement was made during the high pressure of a nationally televised presidential candidate debate, it is not entirely surprising that it is not clear and precise. It appears that Harris said that Trump is willing to sell out Poland to Russian dictator Vladimir Putin (the threat), and that the large Polish American population of Pennsylvania (the mention), a noted swing state in US elections, should be concerned about this and vote accordingly. Other interpretations are possible, given the choppy syntax. The publicly recognized interpretation of the statement is the one described above, however.

When young respondents are reacting to that comment, they may be thinking of themselves as either Democrats, Republicans, Polish Americans, non-Polish Americans, liberals, conservatives, or some combination of these and myriad other identities available to them. If their Polish American identity prevails, then they likely strongly agree with the statement. If their Republican identity is in charge, they may strongly disagree with it.

Fully 68% of young Polish American Democrats strongly agree with the statement, while only 45% of non-Polish American Democrats do (chi-square=9.529, sig. (two-tailed)=.049). Literally zero Democratic Polish Americans disagree or strongly disagree with the

statement. Conversely, 66% of Polish American Republicans disagree or strongly disagree with the statement, while 75% of non-Polish American Republicans disagree or strongly disagree. Nearly nine percent of Republican Polish Americans strongly agree with the statement, and these substantial differences are statistically significant (chi-square=10.561, sig. (two-tailed)=.032). Partisanship and Polish American identity are interacting regarding response to the statement, with partisanship seeming to trump ethnicity (except perhaps for the small number of young Polish American Republicans who strongly agree with the statement and must have felt very conflicted). Given that partisanship is such a strong predictor of vote choice, it is difficult for another identity to move a committed partisan's vote choice. According to the CNN exit polls, 95% of self-identified Democrats voted for Harris, while 94% of Republicans voted for Trump (Election 2024).

Political party is still the dominant predictor of actual vote choice in this sample of young Ohio voters as well. For example, among Polish American Democrats, 92% voted for Harris, while among other Democrats, only 88% did. Among Polish American Republicans, 81% voted for Trump, while 82% of other respondents did. Many young Democrats turned away from Harris in 2024 because they perceived her as not doing enough on issues like the Israel/Palestine war. Young Polish American Democrats were more loyal to the party's nominee, perhaps in part because of the particular appeal Harris made to Polish Americans.

What about using support for Harris's statement to predict the vote? If the only thing you knew about a voter was whether or not they agreed with the statement, you could do a pretty good job predicting their vote for President. Among those who strongly agreed, 88% voted for Harris; among those who merely agreed 80% voted for Harris. This pattern is the same for both

Polish American respondents and non-Polish American respondents, which suggests the role of partisanship more than ethnic identity.

Interestingly, 89% of Polish Americans who strongly agree with Harris's statement voted for her, while 80% of those who just agree voted for her. Among Polish Americans who strongly disagree with Harris's statement, 89% voted for Trump, while 71% of those who only agreed with it voted for Trump. These results are far from surprising. However, they do open an interesting question that the data here does not permit us to analyze, which is the causal direction. Does level of agreement/disagreement with the statement cause the candidate preference, or does candidate preference cause the level of agreement/disagreement with the statement? Either option is plausible, or while they are mutually exclusive at the individual level, it is possible that the causal arrow points in one direction for some respondents, and in another for others.

### **Young Polish Americans: Bits and Pieces**

Polish American respondents are nearly statistically significantly ( $p=.110$ ) less than others to oppose raising the minimum wage in a hypothetical referendum (64% v. 70%). This could be their Republican and conservative identities coming out, in that there is not really a "Polish American" position on that question. Interestingly, Polish Americans come from a slightly different array of areas than do non-Polish American respondents. For example, 46% of Polish Americans come from the suburbs, while only 36% of others do; only 17% of Polish Americans come from a rural area, while 28% of the other respondents do. For some reason, Polish American respondents are statistically significantly much more likely than others to say they strongly agree that they have conversations with people who disagree with them about

politics (39% to 29%). Perhaps it's the cliché of the argumentative Polish American at work, and Polish Americans enjoy challenging and being challenged by ideas with which they disagree.

### **Maintaining Ethnicity**

While Pienkos (2021) argued that there are at least two conditions that must be met for the Polish American vote to affect the outcome of a presidential election, namely that the issue of the fate of Poland must be raised during the campaign, and also the election has to be close, we have considered also that there must be a group of voters who care about Poland so much that they would actually factor such a concern into their decision about for whom to vote. Is there still such a community? How is the Polish American community maintained in the absence for most Polish Americans of life in a closely-knit ethnic enclave?

Building on Gitelman's analysis of the acculturation of Jews in the Soviet Union (2002), Spickard et al. (2016) contrasting "latent ethnicity" and "active ethnicity" (p. ?), Yoder's (1985) idea of ethnicity as a continuum, and Dormon's (1984) argument that "Acadian" festivals of Louisiana began to arouse the latent ethnicity of the Louisiana Cajun population when they were begun in the late 1960s, Jackson (2024) argued that For Polish Americans many generations removed from the immigrant experience, Polish American identity may be maintained and nurtured by the activities of symbolic ethnicity, such as attending Polish festivals and other Polish events, celebrating holidays with some Polish flair, eating Polish foods and so forth. This symbolically-maintained latent ethnicity can become active ethnicity when Polish Americans hear a Polish joke and feel compelled to respond, or take offense or joy at real or perceived snubs or support from politicians or elected officials. This in turn could influence their party preferences and voting behavior.

This is especially true for Polish Americans who are not ethnic activists or scholars of the diaspora; that is, those for whom Polish American identity is not as salient a factor in their lives.

Latent ethnicity can manifest itself in multiple ways that are very context-dependent. Polish Americans' latent ethnicity can be ignited by hearing the Polish language sung by a pop star, as Bobby Vinton did with his hit song "My Melody of Love" in 1974, or the Polish American character defended by a polka star, as Happy Louie Dusseault did in his song "Love and Peace" a couple of years later. It reaffirms people's ethnic identity, helps them connect with their families, and likely inspires them to keep traditions alive and pass on elements of Polish American identity to their children and grandchildren. They may come to support ethnic organizations, churches or businesses. Latent ethnicity could cause them to vote for a candidate from their ethnic background because they believe she will better understand their concerns, or they may vote for a candidate who makes explicit appeals to the Polish American community. While it is possible to dismiss this ethnicity as purely symbolic or performative, the data presented here suggests that even Polish Americans many generations removed from the immigrant experience think about politics differently than do other Americans. Here we speculate that those day-to-day activities that have no discernible political significance help Polish Americans maintain their ethnic identity. It is termed "latent," because this latency does not manifest itself in obvious ways on a regular basis, especially in the eyes of Americans of other ethnic and racial identities. However, attending the local Polish parish festival, non-religious Polish festival, Polish night at the ball park, listening to polka music with grandma and grandpa, and eating pierogi along with the Thanksgiving turkey all serve to keep the Polish

American identity alive, which can then be activated by comments like then-Vice President Harris's, as the complex data analyzed here indicates.

The sample of young, Midwestern Polish Americans indicates a number of things politically. The Polish American respondents were a bit less likely to be Democrats and liberals, and a bit more likely to be Republican and conservative. They were a little less likely than other respondents to have voted for Harris, and her statement directed at Polish American voters was received very differently by Polish Americans than by other respondents. Polish American identity competes with partisanship, gender, and other identities when young Polish Americans are deciding which presidential candidate to support, with partisanship still mattering a lot. Given that Harris lost the 2024 presidential election after such an explicit appeal to Polish Americans, will future presidential candidates back away from such appeals? This seems unlikely, given that the winning 2024 candidate made explicit appeals to the Polish American community during all three of his presidential runs. Among other activities designed to attract Polish American voters in 2024, Donald Trump did an interview on right-wing TV Republika, where he asserted that Kamala Harris and the Democratic Party do not like Polish people. He made an appeal for the Polish American vote along religious and class lines by saying, "I hope the Polish people can get out and vote for somebody that shares their values about things (like) religion and our lives and our work and work ethic" ("Trump appeals"). Unfortunately, the survey did not ask about these comments; however, it is reasonable to suspect that Republican Polish Americans would have agreed with them and Democratic Polish Americans would have disagreed.

Also, given that presidential election outcomes turn on small numbers of voters in a handful of swing states with large numbers of voters who identify as Polish American,

candidates will retain strong incentives to make micro appeals to voters in those states because such appeals could be outcome-determinative. Finally, efforts to retain the Polish American ethnic identity remain active, so each of the ingredients for continuing appeals are there for candidates to use. However, it must be acknowledged that political identity does not always align with personal understandings of national or ethnic belonging and identity. Polish Americans make up a small portion of the US population, perhaps around three percent. Each generation is further removed from the immigrant experience, as well as from the tight ethnic neighborhoods that were the norm before suburbanization changed the residential patterns of the community. By the third, fourth or fifth generation, the Polish language is mostly lost, and ethnic practices are largely symbolic. Yet, a visit to one of dozens of Polish festivals that remain in the US will reveal hundreds or thousands of people dressed in red and white, greeting each other in Polish, drinking Polish beer, eating Polish food, and hearing the Polish language sung with varying levels of quality by polka bands. Tens of thousands of words have been printed in attempts to analyze the significance of this defiant holding on to some vestiges of Polish American identity. Future research would benefit from a random, national sample of Polish Americans, but so far such an undertaking has been deemed too expensive to accomplish. But in any event, the role of ethnicity in American presidential and other politics remains a topic worthy of study.

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