

# Rock the Vote

With thin margins between the electorates of liberal and conservative parties in Poland, both look at potential supporters in the US. So, who will succeed?

The question of the Polonia vote in Polish elections illustrates many of the gray areas that arise when democratic principles are applied in a global, mobile world.

Imagine for a moment what would have happened if a district of 2 million more voters was added to the list of those eligible to vote in the November, 2005 Polish presidential elections. Nine hundred thousand of them, or just under 50 percent, cast a ballot. Seven hundred thousand vote for Donald Tusk, whereas only 200,000 vote for Lech Kaczyński. With the votes from that added district, the election would have gone to Donald Tusk.

That sounds improbable, but in theory, it is possible. Nine million people in the United States identify themselves as being of Polish heritage. The exact number of those who are Polish citizens and are therefore eligible to vote is not precisely known. It could easily amount to several hundred thousand or even as many as two million, according to Marek Purowski, press attaché at the Polish Embassy in Washington D.C.

The margin of victory in the last Polish presidential election that brought Lech Kaczyński to office was only 330,000 votes. Given the current Polish political landscape Polonia, the Polish community in the United States, could be the determining factor in future elections.

The relationship between the American Polonia and Poland has been bittersweet in recent years. During the Cold War, many Polish Americans worked selflessly toward the vision of a free and democratic Poland. However, according to Czeslaw Karkowski, senior editor at *Nowy Dziennik*, the New York based Polish language daily newspaper, once the goal was achieved Poland went its separate way, ignoring Polonia's ideas for a new democratic Poland. The disappointment in the voices of those who worked hard is palpable. "When we thought, at this great breakthrough that eventually, a great reunion would come; well, it didn't," notes Karkowski. "Our opinions were not taken

into consideration."

Excluding or dismissing the needs or desires of a particular sector of the Polish community is nothing new in Polish politics. However, as the 2005 Polish elections demonstrate, a political party in a democratic society ignores certain sectors of the electorate at its peril. One can easily argue that the dismissive attitude of the SLD politicians toward working and rural classes Poland in pursuit of their own interests, without even making the slightest effort to hide their corruption, led to that party's near total demise in the 2005 elections.

Those social classes may have been uneducated and poor, but they had one key power that the political elite of the SLD seemed to forget: The right to vote. They used it to nearly vote the SLD out of existence, and place the government firmly in the hands of Law and Justice (PiS), Self-Defense (Samoobrona), and the League of Polish Families (LPR), dramatically changing the makeup of the Polish government and the direction of the country.

It may just now be Polonia's turn to wield similar influence, should they wish to use it.

Having the vote is one matter; using it is another. Up until now, Polonia's participation in Polish elections has been lethargic. During the 2005 presidential elections, barely 10,000 voters cast ballots on US soil. But the desire for them to play some role in Polish politics is not an entirely foreign idea.

According to Karkowski, many ideas were floated in the early 1990's as to how that large group of people with Polish roots who lived in other countries could come together to aid Poland in its transition, including representative seats in the lower house of the parliament, the Sejm. None of it came to pass.

In the past, Poland's political parties have not pursued the "Polonia vote" aggressively, but some past candidates have made attempts. Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz campaigned in the United States and even had her own office in Washington, and Marian Krzaklewski of

the now defunct Solidarity Action Front (AWS) spent a good deal of time in the United States building relationships with the Polonia. But as the current political landscape becomes more polarized and as margins of victory narrow, a more structured campaign that targets these voters as part of a party's overall political strategy might become reality.

The mixed views on the subject within Polonia complicate matters. Polish-born Elżbieta Matynia, associate professor of sociology and liberal studies, and director of the Trans-regional Center for Democratic Studies at the New School of Social Research in New York, believes unequivocally that everyone who has a right to vote, should maintain that right and should vote. When it comes to the youth vote, her opinion is shared by Katarzyna Szajewska, one of the founders of *wybieram.pl*, a non-partisan group inspired by and modeled after the American group Rock the Vote, which seeks to encourage young Poles to participate in the democratic process.

On the other hand, Ted Mirecki, a national director of the Polish American Congress (PAC), as well as a long-time observer of developments in Poland, speaking on his own behalf and not on behalf of PAC, thinks that longtime residents of the United States should not vote in any Polish elections, even if they have the right to do so. "I would not presume to tell the people of Poland what is good for them," says Mirecki. The fact that a Polish American might be interested in the well being of Poland is, in Mirecki's view, not enough. "I consider Chicago as my home town. I've spent the largest number of years of my life in Chicago, and I'm very interested in what happens in Chicago, and the politics of Chicago. But if I were to write to Mayor Daley and tell him, 'I want to vote in your mayoral election,' he'd tell me to take a hike," says Mirecki.

Czeslaw Karkowski, thinks the same. "They speak of no taxation without representation," says Karkowski. "The opposite should apply as well: No representation without taxation. [...] As a Polish American, I could vote for a monarchy in Poland if I so chose, it would cost me nothing."

Some Polish citizens living in the US are indeed far removed from matters in Poland. Those living in the US who are eligible to vote may be divided into three groups: Those Poles who are living here for work, with the expectation that they will

return to Poland for good; those Poles who immigrated and either hold a green card or have become naturalized US citizens, and reside permanently in the States yet retain their Polish citizenship; and those born in the United States to a Polish parent, and thereby claim a right of Polish citizenship. For this third group, it is theoretically possible for them to be eligible to vote in Polish elections, even if they have never set foot on Polish soil, or do not speak Polish, an idea which troubles some.

Even if the political parties organize themselves to get out the vote in the US, they may find their efforts are for naught. Many Polish voters with permanent residence in the US do not see the point of voting in Polish elections. Ten thousand votes nationwide in the last presidential election, compared to the conservatively measured several hundred thousand eligible, signals the need for some hard campaigning to bring out the Polonia vote. That implies additional cost and expense. Karkowski adds to this the fact that Polish Americans do not turn out in great numbers American elections, let alone Polish elections.

None of the major political parties have representative offices in the US; as of press

time, Law and Justice did not respond to inquiries from Poland Monthly as to the party's plans with respect to American Polonia. Civic Platform's Urszula Gacek, a member of the Polish Senate, is in the unique position of being the only member of the Senate to have been born and raised in the United Kingdom. She does not know of any current initiatives by Civic Platform (PO) in the US, although she knows of individuals in the United Kingdom organizing activities in support of PO, but notes that pursuing the American Polonia vote is an "interesting idea."

However, there are signs of change in the Polish attitude toward Polonia. Insofar as the Senate is the caretaker of Polonia issues, Senator Gacek has been working for the last several months as part of a Senate group that is examining the impact of the mass immigration of the past two years following European Union admission. It has forced them to rethink Poland's entire Polonia policy, including American Polonia. They are considering a number of legislative initiatives surrounding overseas voting by Polish citizens, including voting by mail. In an interesting return to an old idea, they have proposed making two seats in the Senate elected

exclusively by Polonia. All of them are in the study stages, and their chances of becoming law are difficult to predict.

Yet limiting the rights of these people who have been designated as Polish citizens would create more problems than it solves. The idea of tying a vote to some social status, like landownership, is now archaic. United States citizens maintain their right to vote, even if they have lived in another country for years. As difficult as it may be for some to accept, those against the idea of American Polonia voting in Polish elections will have to rely on moral suasion, rather than a legal curtailment of voting rights to promote their cause.

To imagine a Polish political party's victory hinging on its ability to garner the support of voters living in the United States shows that Poles are learning the hard way what the US electorate learned in the 2000 elections: As margins of victory drop, the quirks in the democratic system become more visible, and the strategies more subtle. Blocks of voters that represent swing blocks suddenly become the most important group in the election. Now Polonia can be that next target group.

■ Robert Kopacz

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