

## **Record Number of Poles Register to Vote in the US. “I've been here a long time, but it's my right.”**

A record number of Poles abroad registered to vote in the parliamentary election over the weekend, and the large Polish community in the US is no exception. Over 48,000 people registered — compared to 32,000 in the 2019 parliamentary election — while 52 polling districts across 21 states were created to accommodate the high demand.

At 25 locations in Florida, Georgia, Washington, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Ohio, Michigan and Indiana, voting started at 7 a.m. local time. Due to the time difference, polling stations in Illinois and Texas opened an hour later, while voters in Colorado were let in at 3 p.m. Polish time. Finally, Arizona and Nevada, as well as states on the West Coast, including California, Oregon and Washington, could start voting at 4 p.m. Polish time.

### **Voting for a change**

For many, this election felt particularly pivotal, motivating them to participate even when they hadn't in previous years.

“Back in the day, I didn't really vote, because I was normally abroad and wasn't really thinking about politics,” 34-year-old internet marketer Ula tells *Gazeta Wyborcza*, identifying as pro-European Union and pro-women's rights. She first moved in 2014 and now spends her time traveling back and forth between the US and Poland: “I really don't like what's happening in Poland recently, so I had to vote. I love my country, and I want to keep coming back.”

One question came up repeatedly when speaking to Poles in the US — should I have the right to decide about Poland's political future when I left the country years ago? In fact, when *Gazeta Wyborcza* reached out to potential voters, many turned down the request to comment, saying that they don't feel qualified to have a say in the election.

Katarzyna Schmidt-Nwachukuwu disagrees: "I understand I've been here a long time, but it's my right to vote. If I want to return to Poland for a portion of the year, I really think that it should be my individual

choice to help decide.”

The 43-year-old account manager moved to the US 21 years ago after working as an au pair for an American family. When asked which party she had voted for, Katarzyna laughed and replies, “the best”. Though she did not want to say who she was referring to, she wants the government to “be there for Polish people and immigrants” and create new opportunities that keep Poles from moving to other countries.

## **Organized voting process**

Some people received warnings about long waiting lists while registering online, including Katarzyna, who voted at a polling station in Lombard, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. The latter city also saw the most voters, with just under 8,000 people registering via the ‘e-Election’ system.

Despite this, all people we talked to were able to vote shortly after arriving at the polling station.

“I know there were really long lines abroad, but we only waited about 5 minutes. However, there was no moment at which someone wasn’t voting,” says Kasia Mecinski, a second-generation Polish-American influencer. She voted in Seattle with the intention to increase equality in Poland, specifically in regard to social services like childcare.

Property manager and entrepreneur Agnieszka Fijałkowska also noticed that people were coming and going even though, due to the rainy weather, there were few lines in front of the Polish Consulate in New York City. She voted, because she wants Poland to continue its support for Ukraine and hopes that a new government can strengthen ties with the EU and the US.

Due to the rain, Agnieszka decided to take the hour-long express train to the Consulate from her home in Stamford, Connecticut: “I was in the train and I realized, ‘oh my god, I forgot my passport’. And without your passport you cannot vote.”

She felt that she had no choice but to get out in Harlem and take the train back to Stamford, before grabbing her passport and doing the entire trip

again. “It took me like four and a half hours to get there, but I did it. So, I posted on Facebook yesterday: ‘no excuse, if I can handle this, you can do this too. So, vote, guys!’”

## **From the polls to the restaurant**

According to the US Census Bureau, there were 8.81 million self-identified Polish Americans in the United States in 2021. For those who can, voting in a Polish election is a way to stay connected to their culture and identity.

At Seattle’s polling station, the Polish Home Association community center, some even wanted to get directly involved: “When the opportunity to recruit volunteers to serve on the election committee came up, we had more people than needed. Everyone was willing to spend those 20 hours serving the community,” says Teresa Indelak Davis, Honorary Consul of Poland in Seattle.

After voting at the Polish consulate in New York City, many Poles also stopped at nearby restaurants to eat and discuss politics, Agnieszka observed: “Voting is always like a festival here in the United States. It’s something special to people,” she explains. “It’s not only an obligation, but you want to feel like you still belong to the Polish community.”