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Ethnicity in politics: 1986 and beyond

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The last Polish-American to seek a prominent state office was Aurelia Pucinski, daughter of prominent Polish-American politician and community leader Roman Pucinski. He served as U.S. Representative from 1959 to 1973 and alderman (41st) from 1973 to 1991.

In 1986, Aurelia Pucinski ran for secretary of state alongside George E. Sangmeister for lieutenant governor and Adlai Stevenson for governor with the Solidarity Party. Stevenson had formed the party in reaction to the Democratic party's nomination of right-wing extremist's Lyndon LaRouche disciples for lieutenant governor and secretary of state. Stevenson said he didn't want to run with anyone associated with LaRouche, and broke with the Democratic Party.

When Pucinski and Sangmeister lost the Democratic primary, some said it was because of their ethnic-sounding names. If so, has enough time passed since 1986 that Polish-Americans with long names are electable?

Charlie H. Wheeler, director of the public affairs reporting program at the University of Illinois Springfield, said that Pucinski and Sangmeister didn't necessarily lose because of their ethnic names.

"What occurred there was the Democratic organization fell down on the job in terms of alerting its primary voters as to who these people were," Wheeler said in a phone interview Friday. "When the Democratic local officials didn't say anything, people voted for more familiar sounding names."

Wheeler, who covered politics and state government for the Chicago Sun-Times from 1970 to 1994, said he did a lot of investigating about what had occurred at the time. And that where the Democratic organization told its voters, here's our ticket, these are the people we slated – Pucinski and Sangmeister did well.

"In my precinct in Springfield there was a very active Democrat" who passed out a lot of literature, Wheeler said. As a result, Pucinski and Sangmeister had great primary results. "But in those areas where local organizations were lazy and let things slide, [Mark] Fairchild and [Janice] Hart managed to come in as stealth candidates."

More recently, Wheeler said, "there's obviously been clear examples with funny-sounding names winning state office over people with more familiar 'American' names."

John P. Pelissero, professor of political science at Loyola University, agrees.

"I do not believe that an 'ethnic-sounding' last name is a disadvantage in politics today, particularly in Chicago," he said in an email Monday. "Even state-wide, candidates with names like Blagojevich have been successful in state elections."

Wheeler also gave Rod Blagojevich's 2002 defeat of Jim Ryan as a prime example. Ryan, Wheeler said, is "sort of an all-American name whereas Blagojevich is not your ordinary name you'd find in a phone book."

Alexi Giannoulas, with his atypical, not WASP name, got himself elected treasurer, Wheeler said. Judy Barr Topinka was elected treasurer three times before losing the governorship to Blagojevich in 2006.

"If party organizations back their slated candidates and if the media provides information about who they are, people with non-typical Anglo-Saxon names can get themselves elected," Wheeler said, adding that parties don't slate the way they used to in the past.

Wheeler gave other examples: Raja Krishnamoorthi, an Indian-American, is running for state comptroller, while Steve Kim, an Asian-American is running for attorney general.

"Those folks are virtually certain to lose, not because of ethnicity, but Jesse White is very, very popular and Lisa Madigan polled more votes than any other Democrat," Wheeler said.

So why would – and should – these candidates run?

Wheeler said that some know they may not be elected now, but the experience will help them. They may use such a bid as a trial run and learn from mistakes they made, being a more seasoned candidate the next time they try.

Additionally, Wheeler said that surprises have happened in Illinois before: Carol Moseley-Braun was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1992, defeating the popular incumbent Alan Dixon. And in 2004, a neophyte in the State Senate with a “goofy sounding name” became the Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate, Wheeler said.

“Nobody would’ve given Obama a chance,” Wheeler said. “He went ahead and filed, and got elected to the U.S. Senate. And is now president of the United States.”

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