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Upcoming Presidential Elections and Political System in the USA (Part 2)

A) Reading Comprehension

First, read the following text about the phenomenon of the so-called "swing" or "battleground" states (and counties) in the context of a presidential election in the United States of America – compiled and adapted mainly from the blog article by Adam Tooze, dated 02nd October, 2024 (available from: https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-323-three-theories-of-swing), as well as the article by James FitzGerald, dated 31st October, 2024 (available from the following BBC News website: https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c511pyn3xw3o) – and perform the following tasks:

Task I: Skim the following text (without going into detail or checking the problematic words and/or expressions), quickly trying to get the general idea of what is the message of all the main sections of the text.

Task II: Read the text, this time at your own pace, and answer the more or less general **Questions 1-8** related to the contents of selected paragraphs of the text listed below. Do not check the problematic words in a dictionary – try to guess or work their meanings out from the context, just using your intelligence and your own knowledge of the world we live in.

In other words, to be more precise, while trying to understand the text do not forget all the knowledge that you have about the presidential election and the political system in the United States of America. This background knowledge will make it easier for you to understand the contents of the article. (For your convenience, particular questions have also been provided directly under the main sections of the text to which they refer).

1. *What is paradoxical about the presidential election system in the U.S.A.*?
2. *What may be considered puzzling about U.S. presidential elections*?
3. *What is the reason behind the current election system in the U.S.A.*?
4. *What is the reason why all the states in the U.S.A. are not 'swing states' today*?
5. *What is the possible difference between 'battleground' and 'swing' states*?
6. *Is the number of the 'battleground' and 'swing' states relatively constant*?
7. *What is the point of paying attention to hotly contested counties*?
8. *What are the reasons postulated above for the emergence of swing states*?

Task III: Read the text one more time, paying attention to detail, and try to work out the meaning of the underlined terms and expressions related to the specialist context of the presidential election and the political system in the U.S.A. At first, do not check the problematic words in a dictionary – try to work their meanings out from the context (just as in Task II). If, despite your best efforts, you are not able to identify the meanings on your own, use a dictionary.

Task IV: Once you have identified the meanings of the underlined specialist terms and/or expressions, try to think about (or, if nothing springs to mind, find in a dictionary) their possible Polish translations and write them down. For your convenience, a complete list of the underlined vocabulary items in question has been provided under the text (**Vocabulary Checklist 1**), arranged in the order of their appearance in the text.

Task V: Once you have written Polish translations of the underlined terms and/or expressions, try to think about the English synonyms (or synonymous expressions) that you might know to the words and/or expressions in question (if there any – because in the case of specialist terms, optionality is often not allowed). If you can think about any, write them down too. If nothing springs to mind, but you still want to improve your vocabulary, you can certainly consult a dictionary.

Task VI: Once you have completed the Reading Comprehension Tasks I-V (in Part **A** here) and the Listening Comprehensions Tasks I-V (in Part **B** below), move on to **Task VI** in Part **B** below.

Political puzzle of American swing states and battleground counties
(Or the puzzle of why and how 150,000 U.S. voters may decide the future of us all)[1]

The United States of America is a country of 330 million people, with about 240 million citizens eligible to vote in the 2024 election, and 161 million registered voters. Its policy affects the entire planet of 8 billion people, whether it be through foreign policy, trade, climate policy or big technology companies. Its elections cost billions of dollars and are followed closely around the world. The U.S.A. likes to boast that it is the "world's greatest" democracy. That claim implies that majorities matter, i.e. the great mass of the population of 161 million voters decide who governs. And yet, in the view of America's leading political experts, that is far from being the case, and – paradoxically – only a relatively small number of all these voters are likely to decide who becomes the next U.S. president. As David Schultz, a professor of political science and legal studies, has put it (in an interview with National Public Radio): "For me, this presidential campaign is coming down to maybe 150,000 voters that are decisive".[2]

→ Question **1**. *What is paradoxical about the presidential election system in the U.S.A.?*

How can this be?

If you imagined the U.S.A. as one gigantic constituency of 160 million voters and arrayed all the voters from right to left along an ideological spectrum, you could envisage a hotly contested election in which the country split, 80,000,001 voters vs. 79,999,999. In that case, you might say that the struggle came down to a handful of undecided voters in the middle of the spectrum who ultimately picked the winner.

If that were the case, it would be no scandal at all. On the contrary, it would be the logic of democracy in action. But that is not the kind of the political contest that is going on in the U.S.A. today. The "scandal" of the U.S. election is not that it is a titanic struggle for tens of millions of votes that will ultimately be decided by a fine margin. The scandal is that tens of millions of votes barely attract any attention at all. Only a few places matter and those places are determined by no obvious, larger-scale logic. Moreover, their votes are often influenced by highly specific local conditions. It is a few thousand voters, often in out-of-the-way, "backwater" places, that decide the future of the U.S.A. and, with it, the future of the entire world.

→ Question **2**. *What may be considered puzzling about U.S. presidential elections?*

How can relatively few voters have such a strong impact?

The starting point is that the basic structure of the U.S. political system is still defined by a constitution drafted in the late 18th century. The patchwork of states is defined by the legacy of U.S. territorial expansion in the 19th century, when it was aggressively incorporating most of the North American

[1] This text is based mainly on Tooze (2024) and, to some extent, on FitzGerald (2024).

[2] In an interview with National Public Radio (which is a non-government radio station in the U.S.A.).

continent. This has shaped a sprawling federal polity made up of very unevenly sized states. Those states send delegations to the Electoral College, which actually elects the President, a device not uncommon in early constitutions.[3] The composition of those state delegations is decided in the vast majority of cases on the basis of simple majorities, again a crude electoral mechanism shared with the United Kingdom, another "ancient constitution" country. Whichever party has the largest number of votes in a state appoints all the delegates representing the given state.

→ Question **3**. *What is the reason behind the current election system in the U.S.A.?*

This, by itself, does not necessarily create the pattern we see today. If states were similar in their political make-up, all states would be so-called 'swing states', i.e. states without voters' distinctive preference for one party over another. The 18th century constitution provides the framework, but what creates the weird shape of U.S. democracy today are further processes of differentiation, polarization and sorting, as Americans have increasingly migrated and congregated into communities that are relatively more uniform in political terms than the nation viewed as a whole. That tendency has been reinforced as political convictions have become more polarized and have begun to color more and more areas of life, meaning that you can now meaningfully talk of "Red" (i.e. Republican) and "Blue" (i.e. Democratic) states with different politics corresponding to very different modes of life. On a question like the abortion rights it is no exaggeration to talk of the U.S.A. as one country with two systems.

→ Question **4**. *What is the reason why all the states in the U.S.A. are not 'swing states' today?*

What is the consequence of such localized uniformity?

Put all these factors together and the consequence is that in most parts of the U.S.A. the local outcome of the U.S. presidential election is a foregone conclusion. For example, the bottom line in the whole state of New York, regardless of what happens in its many rural areas and localities, is that it will surely go for the Democratic party candidate. Push this logic to its final conclusion, and one could imagine a situation in which the entire election was a foregone conclusion. The dirty secret of democracy – like that of capitalism – is that for all the celebration of competition and choice, in fact, the players in the political system all dream of the day in which competition will cease and they will command a legal monopoly. Their nightmare is the opposite, i.e. that the other side establishes that lock-grip.

The U.S. politics today is fired by precisely this fear – that the other side of the political conflict will be able to establish such a monopoly. However, the actually existing state of affairs is very hard to call because the states that are solidly in both camps are not enough to give either side a clear majority.

The consequence of this situation is that the final outcome is decided by a handful of battleground or swing states. Many U.S. states have small electorates of only a few million or so. And then, at the state level, the same logic repeats, with sorting and the formation of staunch blue or red constituencies in big cities, as well as small towns and rural areas, which means that in the end the entire election comes down not to tens of millions (or millions), but a few hundred thousand voters in the "battleground counties" dotted around the country. If the true number of decisive voters is 150,000 (as claimed by the expert quoted above), this accounts merely for one tenth of one percent of the entire electorate.[4]

The common terminology for these key locations is battleground or swing states/counties. If you wish to impose a sharp distinction on fuzzy political language, battleground states are the places where the election is close. Swing states are states where the electoral result has swung from one party to the other, whether the margin of victory is large or small. In psychological terms, you might say that whereas battleground states are undecided, swing states are characterized by mood swings.

→ Question **5**. *What is the possible difference between 'battleground' and 'swing' states?*

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[3] For more on the role of the Electoral College, see Cabral (2020), Thelen (2024) and the information on the U.S. National Archives website (at: https://www.archives.gov/electoral-college/about).

[4] See Faguy and Looker (2024).

Battleground and swing states – the trends

Since the 19th century, it has been true that particular battleground states have been vital to the outcome of U.S. presidential elections. There has always been a focus on close races. The term "swing state", by contrast, only came into widespread use in the early 2000s, as America began to worry about polarization and sorting, and the phenomenon of switching sides became more and more unusual. Taken together, we face the declining number of the states in which the outcome is not predictable in advance.

By 2012, according to one enumeration, we had already been down to 4 swing/battleground states (compared to 20 such competitive states in the 1960 and 1976 elections).[5] In the 2024 election, seven crucial states are reckoned to hold the keys to the White House: Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.[6]

→ Question **6**. *Is the number of the 'battleground' and 'swing' states relatively constant?*

Battleground states or battleground counties?

Taken together, the swing states account for a significant group of voters and a considerable economic power. A report quoted by Tooze (2024) states that: "For perspective, those seven states form a battleground economy with a population of 61 million people and a combined gross domestic product worth $4.4 trillion – a figure that rivals Germany's output."

However, if you look more closely, you will realize that: (a) these states do not actually form a coherent whole and (b) even with those states the election will be decided by far smaller and more concentrated groups of voters. American political science digs deep into the facts. Consequently, we also have enumerations of more and less hotly contested counties. Once again, due to sorting and sifting, the number of such counties has been declining. Of course, one should beware of assuming that hotly contested counties are located mainly in hotly-contested states. This may not be true at all. You can have hotly contested counties in the states that are otherwise staunchly red or blue. Those counties are worth watching because they may allow us to predict voter behavior elsewhere, even if their influence on the final outcome in a given state is minimal.

→ Question **7**. *What is the point of paying attention to hotly contested counties?*

Clearly, the counties that matter most are the battleground or swing counties (sometimes called pendulum counties) in the states that are actually "in play". This is why you find political scientists like David Schultz pointing out that even within swing states not every voter is a swing voter. The expert suggests that this year's presidential contest could hinge not simply on swing states but swing counties. He estimates that 5 per cent of the voters in five counties in five states could determine the outcome of the 2024 election. As emphasized before, he believes that the number of the decisive voters for this year's presidential campaign in the U.S.A. amounts to merely about 150,000.

Any particular reasons for becoming a swing state?

Another obvious question is what actually makes a swing state a swing state? Why is the election in these areas so close and the outcome undetermined? Tooze (2024) points to three possible explanations.

One interpretation may be that the voters in swing states are different. Whereas the electorate in most states can be neatly sorted into Red or Blue, in swing states there are more "purple voters", i.e. ones not showing a dinstinct tendency towards classic Republican or Democratic attitudes. This might be explained by a distinct cultural influence, e.g. of the Mormon religion, which shapes a particular coloration of conservatism, different from that in such states as New Jersey or Mississippi.

[5] See: Hecht and Schultz (2015).

[6] For a closer look at the seven 2024 swing states, see: FitzGerald (2024).

Another theory may be that the voters in swing states are as clearly differentiated into Red and Blue as in other states, but they are thrown together by historical accident within the boundaries of a single state in such a way as to make for a fine balance. (You might call this a theory of incomplete sorting: perhaps they will eventually end up in one political camp. Or, perhaps, the sorting will remain deadlocked).

A third explanation is about the places, rather than the voters. Let us call this the "states of change" theory. It perceives swing states as places to which, or in which, things happen (e.g. structural economic changes) that either divide the electorate in the ways that make the outcome hard to call, making them battlegrounds, or shift the electorate first one way and then the other, making them swing states.

→ Question **8**. *What are the reasons postulated above for the emergence of swing states?*

These three logics of regional electoral competition in the U.S.A. are not mutually exclusive, as they often overlap. Neither are they static. Ideologies and attitudes shift. The self-sifting and sorting of the American population is continuous. Florida, to take one example, was once a key battleground state but nowadays it is assumed to be staunchly Republican. But even if they shade into one another, these three logics are distinct and, for the followers of the political coverage of the election, it is clarifying to see how they may explain the political contests that really matter in the U.S. election.

(**Note**: You can also take advantage of the reference materials used for the following text (listed in the 'References' section at the very bottom) so that you can learn more about this subject, as well as enjoy the first-hand experience of having access to the authentic U.S. political system related material.)

Vocabulary Checklist 1 **(Reading Comprehension)**:

(A complete list of the terms and/or expressions underlined in the text, arranged in the order of their appearance in the text – for you to work on, as in the Reading Comprehension Tasks IV and V above).

eligible to vote – . . . . . .

registered voters – . . . . . .

to affect sth – . . . . . .

foreign policy – . . . . . .

to boast (that…) – . . . . . .

to imply – . . . . . .

majorities matter – . . . . . .

far from being the case – . . . . . .

political science – . . . . . .

to come down to sth – . . . . . .

decisive – . . . . . .

constituency – . . . . . .

ideological spectrum – . . . . . .

hotly contested – . . . . . .

to split – . . . . . .

undecided voter – . . . . . .

ultimately – . . . . . .

to pick the winner – . . . . . .

political contest – . . . . . .

titanic struggle – . . . . . .

to be decided by a fine margin – . . . . . .

to attract attention – . . . . . .

determined by – . . . . . .

out-of-the-way – . . . . . .

backwater – . . . . . .

to have an impact (on sth) – . . . . . .

legacy – . . . . . .

polity – . . . . . .

unevenly sized – . . . . . .

Electoral College – . . . . . .

the composition of sth – . . . . . .

in the (vast) majority of cases – . . . . . .

simple majority – . . . . . .

electoral mechanism – . . . . . .

to appoint sb – . . . . . .

political make-up (of a state) – . . . . . .

swing states – . . . . . .

preference for one party over another – . . . . . .

increasingly – . . . . . .

uniform – . . . . . .

in political terms – . . . . . .

viewed as a whole – . . . . . .

political convictions – . . . . . .

polarized – . . . . . .

Red/red – . . . . . .

Blue/blue – . . . . . .

it is no exaggeration (to do sth) – . . . . . .

uniformity – . . . . . .

the outcome (of sth) – . . . . . .

(sth) is a foregone conclusion – . . . . . .

the bottom line – . . . . . .

to cease – . . . . . .

to be fired by sth – . . . . . .

the state of affairs – . . . . . .

(to give sb) a clear majority – . . . . . .

the final outcome – . . . . . .

to be decided by sth – . . . . . .

battleground or swing states – . . . . . .

electorate – . . . . . .

a staunch blue/red constituency – . . . . . .

decisive voters – . . . . . .

a sharp distinction (on sth) – . . . . . .

fuzzy – . . . . . .

the election is close – . . . . . .

the electoral result – . . . . . .

to swing from one party to the other – . . . . . .

vital (to sth) – . . . . . .

close race – . . . . . .

by contrast – . . . . . .

to come into widespread use – . . . . . .

to switch sides – . . . . . .

declining number – . . . . . .

predictable – . . . . . .

to be reckoned (to be sth)– . . . . . .

considerable – . . . . . .

gross domestic product – . . . . . .

trillion – . . . . . .

to form a coherent whole – . . . . . .

hotly contested – . . . . . .

one should beware of doing sth – . . . . . .

staunchly red/blue – . . . . . .

voter behavior – . . . . . .

swing voter – . . . . . .

presidential contest – . . . . . .

to hinge on sth – . . . . . .

to emphasize – . . . . . .

undetermined – . . . . . .

neatly sorted – . . . . . .

purple voter – . . . . . .

clearly differentiated – . . . . . .

political camp – . . . . . .

to shift sth – . . . . . .

mutually exclusive – . . . . . .

to overlap – . . . . . .

to shade into sth – . . . . . .

political coverage – . . . . . .

B) Listening Comprehension

Now, watch the BBC News report on the current state of the presidential race in the U.S.A., entitled *US election enters final day of campaigning*, dated 04th November, 2024 (which is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBLQvrtzTAc), and perform the following tasks:

Task I: Before you watch the BBC News report, read the more or less general **Questions 1-17** related to its contents listed below, trying to understand what they are about. Do not check the problematic words in a dictionary – try to guess or work their meanings out from the context, just using your intelligence and your own knowledge of the world we live in.

In other words, to be more precise, while trying to understand the questions do not forget all the knowledge that you have about the political system and upcoming presidential election in the U.S.A., in particular the profile of the candidates, their agendas and the most recent developments in their campaigns. This background knowledge will make it easier for you to understand the contents of the questions. And please bear in mind that some of the questions may look problematic at first, but they will become more obvious to understand when you actually watch the video. The questions for you are:

1. *What have both candidates been recently concentrating on*?
2. *How many states especially important to this year's election result are there*?
3. *What did Donald Trump complain about when visiting Pennsylvania*?

4. *Meanwhile, who was Kamala Harris appealing to in Michigan so that they would support the Democrats*?
5. *What places did Harris visit in Michigan to talk to the voters?*
6. *What did Harris say that the U.S.A. was ready for*?
7. *What both candidates have been focusing their energy on*?
8. *What does the lady interviewed in Georgia say was better during Trump's presidency*?
9. *How many Americans had made use of early voting until Monday, November 4th (i.e. until one day before the election)*?
10. *Where will rival rallies be held by both candidates on the last day before the election*?
11. *What are the people that the candidates are trying to reach in this way*?
12. *Why is the election result 'a huge deal' (i.e. of vital importance) not just for the U.S.A.*?
13. *What is the mood like in both the camps and among their supporters*?
14. *What was the change in Kamala Harris's tactics during her latest rally*?
15. *What issues is Trump trying to emphasize in what he says to voters*?
16. *What is the risk for Trump caused by his controversial joke about 'shooting through the news media'?*
17. *Why are national polls not the best way to predict the U.S. election result?*

Task II: Use the link provided above and watch the BBC News report for the first time, trying to answer **Questions 1-17** listed above. Do not get discouraged if you do not understand much (especially while watching the video for the first time) – the point of this part of the listening exercise is to get the general idea of what the report is about and to answer the questions. No-one is expecting you to understand everything that is being said, or even most of it.

If you come across a word/expression that you cannot hear very well, or a word/expression that you can hear well but you do not understand its meaning, do not panic, do not pause and/or rewind the video, but try to work the meanings out from what you can see on the screen and what you know (just as in the Listening Comprehension Task I above) about the political system and current presidential election campaign in the U.S.A. If you cannot answer the Questions 1-17, please repeat the procedure.

Task III: Once you have answered the questions, watch the news report again, this time paying attention to detail and focusing on the English and Polish terms and/or expressions listed in **Vocabulary Checklist 2**, arranged in the order of their appearance in the video (provided below these Listening Comprehension tasks), and try to:

a) in the case of the <u>English</u> terms and/or expressions listed – work out their meanings from what you can see and hear in the video;

b) in the case of the <u>Polish</u> terms and/or expressions listed – find their English equivalents in what is being said in the video.

At first, do not check the problematic words in a dictionary – try to work their meanings out from the context of what you can see and hear in the video, as well as what you already know about this year's U.S. presidential election (just as in the Listening Comprehension Tasks I and II). If you find it difficult, feel free to pause and/or rewind the video. If, despite your best efforts, you are not able to identify the meanings on your own, use a dictionary.

Task IV: Once you have completed Task III, try to think about (or, if nothing springs to mind, find in a dictionary) possible translations into Polish of the specific English terms and/or expressions in Vocabulary Checklist 2 (unless you have already got their Polish translations listed there, or you had already found their Polish translations when doing Task III). Please, write them down in the empty spaces available in the Vocabulary Checklist 2.

Task V: Once you have written Polish translations of the specific terms and/or expressions, try to think about the English synonyms (or synonymous expressions) that you might know to the words and/or expressions in question (if there any – because in the case of specialist terms, optionality is often not allowed). If you can think about any, write them down too. If nothing springs to mind, but you still want to improve your vocabulary, you can certainly consult a dictionary.

Task VI: Based on the text in Part **A** above (*Political puzzle of American swing states and battleground counties?*) that you have read and the BBC News video in Part **B** here (*US election enters final day of campaigning*) that you have just watched, make a list of the English terminology items and expressions (in particular the specialist ones) useful in the context of (presidential) elections and election campaigns, especially in the context of the political system in the U.S.A. Finally, write down their Polish terminological counterparts (thus making a Polish-English reference list).

(**Note**: You can also take advantage of the reference materials used for the following text (listed in the 'References' section at the very bottom) so that you can learn more about this subject, as well as enjoy the first-hand experience of having access to the authentic U.S. political system related material.)

<u>Vocabulary Checklist 2</u> (Listening Comprehension):

(A complete list of the terms and/or expressions underlined in the text, arranged in the order of their appearance in the text – for you to work on, as in the Listening Comprehension Tasks III and IV above).

the campaign is reaching its final phase – . . . . . .

(the states) most likely to do sth – . . . . . .

to decide the outcome (of the election) – . . . . . .

sondaże wskazują – . . . . . .

an extremely tight result – . . . . . .

not all states require voters to show identification – . . . . . .

mężczyźni tradycyjnie głosujący na republikan – . . . . . .

a rapturous reception – . . . . . .

the closing stages of this presidential race – . . . . . .

two people aiming to (do sth) – . . . . . .

to take charge of (sth) – . . . . . .

największa gospodarka świata – . . . . . .

uparcie przypominać o swoim (wyborczym) przesłaniu – . . . . . .

szkło kuloodporne – . . . . . .

increasingly unstable – . . . . . .

Ameryka jest gotowa na nowe rozdanie – . . . . . .

fellow Americans [*analogicznie:* fellow Poles, etc.] – . . . . . .

bliźni – . . . . . .

to decide this election – . . . . . .

to usher sb's candidate into power – . . . . . .

Trump backers – . . . . . .

kiedy urzędował/rządził Trump – . . . . . .

wcześniejsze głosowanie – . . . . . .

endgame – . . . . . .

ostatni etap wyścigu [*wyborczego, sportowego, itd.*] – . . . . . .

odbędą się (konkurencyjne) wiece – . . . . . .

to win votes – . . . . . .

wyborcy niezdecydowani/wahający się – . . . . . .

go red or blue [*w kontekście politycznym w USA*] – . . . . . .

people who haven't yet cast an early ballot – . . . . . .

udać się do urn wyborczych – . . . . . .

results start spilling in – . . . . . .

to wait for the final result [of the vote] to come through – . . . . . .

konsekwencje na całym świecie – . . . . . .

such a tight race – . . . . . .

wspierać kwestię – . . . . . .

would-be assassin – . . . . . .

the core message (e.g. of the campaign) – . . . . . .

dotrzeć (z przesłaniem) do wyborców – . . . . . .

to keep track of the polls – . . . . . .

wyścig do Białego Domu – . . . . . .

to stand a chance of winning – . . . . . .

within the margin of error – . . . . . .

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