
Will Fracking Decide Who Becomes the Next President?

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Last week, the Trump and Biden campaigns each received a joint letter from the Boards of Commissioners of three Western Pennsylvania counties – Butler, Washington, and Beaver. All are in the Pittsburgh area, and all are large producers of natural gas.

In the letter, the Commissioners stressed the importance of fracking and natural gas production to their communities and local economies. They stated that fracking has reinvigorated Western Pennsylvania and that taxes reaped from the process (including \$2 billion collected in Pennsylvania's impact fee system), support endeavors across all 67 Pennsylvania counties.

That sentiment is shared in the other major natural gas producing area of Pennsylvania, which is in the northeast part of the State, located about 30 miles from Scranton and running northward to the New York border. Indeed, in Pennsylvania, historic polling on this subject shows that support for fracking runs highest in the communities where it occurs.

That causes a dilemma for the Democratic ticket. President Trump, of course, is all in on fracking and fossil fuel production. But for the Biden/Harris ticket, the issue is more complicated and politically fraught.

In July 2019, when asked whether there would be any place for fossil fuels including coal and fracking, Mr. Biden answered "no, we would – we would work it out. We would make sure it's eliminated and no more subsidies to either of those either – any fossil fuel." The former Vice President has made numerous other statements about banning fossil fuels, despite claiming now that he will not do so.

It's been no easier for his running mate, California Senator Kamala Harris. Despite a career of being very skeptical about fracking, she now vociferously states that a Biden/Harris Administration will not ban the process. In fact, her inconsistencies are so noticeable that they reached the point where, last week, she was lampooned on *Saturday Night Live* about it, and she is even getting slammed by New York Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, who directly criticized her about it on Twitter right after last week's Vice-Presidential debate.

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Positions on fracking and natural gas take on an oversized significance in next month's election because Pennsylvania may be the most important swing state that each side recognizes it needs to win to carry the election. Some pollsters, including Nate Silver's "538", declare that Pennsylvania could, in fact, decide the entire 2020 Presidential election.

Meanwhile, within Pennsylvania, public opinion about the issue of fracking and fossil fuel production remains complicated. Despite being home to the first oil well and being one of the leading oil producers throughout the 1800's, energy production in Pennsylvania almost ceased for a century as the industry moved out to the more fertile grounds of Texas and Oklahoma in the 20th Century. However, the combination of two processes – horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing ("fracking") – brought fossil fuel production back to Pennsylvania around 2004. In the last 15 years or so Pennsylvania has grown from being an afterthought in energy production to becoming the second largest natural gas producer in the country, after Texas.

Unlike Texas, however, the most populous part of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia and its environs in the southeast corner of the State, have no energy production, don't understand the industry, and generally don't support it. Politically, support for fracking in Pennsylvania thus breaks down into two intersecting vectors, one following traditional Republican/Democratic political orientation, and the other following geographic energy producing versus non-energy producing orientation. So important can the latter orientation be over the former that, in the Quaker State, Democratic elected officials and voters in energy-producing areas often will support fracking, while Republican elected officials and voters in non-energy procuring areas often will not.

For the Presidential campaigns, the calculation is made even more complicated by the results of 2016, where Trump's margin of victory was aided significantly by a shift among the energy producing counties away from traditional Democratic support to favoring Donald Trump. Biden knows that a repeat of that could be disastrous in 2020.

It all leads to a frantic three weeks in which President Trump will try to galvanize those who voted for him in 2016 by playing up his support for the fossil fuel industry, while Vice President Biden will try to energize suburban Philadelphia voters by noting his ambivalence about fossil fuels while simultaneously going everywhere proclaiming that his administration will not ban fracking. Given the environmentalist tilt of the Democratic Party nationally, it may not be an easy needle to thread, but the former Vice President's chance to win Pennsylvania, and therefore possibly the Presidency, may hinge on how well he manages to carry out this balancing act in the States.

ATTORNEYS MENTIONED

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