Election 2020 - The Energy Voter Strikes Back

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Daniel B. Markind

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Daniel B. Markind is a Forbes.com energy column contributor. The views expressed in this article are not to be associated with the views of Flaster Greenberg PC.

The first warning sign that opposition to fracking and fossil fuels might not play well for the Democrats in the 2020 election came in June, when Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro released what he described as a "scathing grand jury report" on fracking and fracking practices in the Commonwealth. Two years earlier Shapiro had released another widely publicized, and truly shocking, grand jury report detailing alleged sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

The Catholic Church report was hailed as a breakthrough, had substantial impact locally, nationally and internationally, and brought the Attorney General national prominence. However, no similar reaction followed the release of the more recent fracking report. Shapiro's office did induce Range Resources, one of the largest natural gas producers in western Pennsylvania, to plead no contest to alleged environmental crimes at two well locations and to pay a relatively small $150,000 fine. But another major Pennsylvania producer, Cabot Energy, rebuffed Shapiro's charges. Cabot subsequently announced that it was cooperating with the Attorney General's office, but the matter remains ongoing. Perhaps more importantly, despite some initial bad publicity, the story quickly disappeared – a victim seemingly of what many people considered just a rehash of old and well-known news that broke little new ground.

As the election drew closer, Pennsylvania became more of a battleground. During the last week of the campaign, almost every day at least one of the candidates visited our state. Each time he came, President Trump blasted former Vice President Biden for Biden's shifting positions on fracking. Biden constantly reiterated that he would not ban fracking, but his prior stances on the process and on fossil fuels in general left him vulnerable – and made more than a few fracking proponents skeptical of his sincerity.

Prior to the shale revolution that began in Pennsylvania in 2007, Pennsylvania produced little energy. Today, it is the second largest producer of natural gas in the nation, and energy has grown from being a negligible part of the state economy to one of its main engines. Still, heading into election day, Democrats, including many in the "ban fracking" camp, expected both a Biden victory and major gains for the party throughout the state.

It didn't exactly turn out that way. According to the most current vote counts, which are under challenge by the Republicans, Joe Biden did win Pennsylvania, but down ballot Democrats in Pennsylvania took a beating. Both US Representative Matt Cartwright, who represents the gas fields in northeastern Pennsylvania but has kept his distance from the industry, and Representative Conor Lamb, who represents a fracking area in the southwest part of the state, held their seats, but only just barely. In state races, Shapiro himself remained Attorney General but by a much slimmer margin than expected, and in a major surprise Democratic State Treasurer Joe Torsella lost his re-election bid to a little known Republican challenger.

When the final results are in, Republicans look to hold either 10 or 11 of the Commonwealth's 19 congressional districts. More importantly, the State House and Senate, which will handle redistricting once the census is completed and after Pennsylvania likely loses at least one if not two House seats, will remain solidly Republican. Further, just to save what they've retained, many Democrats were forced to distance themselves from the "Green New Deal," which won't sit well with the Progressive wing of the Party.

Pennsylvania's results are not unusual. In Montana, former Democrat Governor Steve Bullock, who ran for the Senate, lost decisively to incumbent Republican Senator Steve Daines. In Colorado, former Democrat Governor John Hickenlooper did unseat incumbent Republican Senator Corey Gardner, but as a former worker in the oil and gas industry, Hickenlooper will be eyed cautiously by the environmental wing of the Democratic Party.

In Texas, Chrysta Castaneda hoped to be the first Democrat on the three-person Texas Railroad Commission (RRC) Board in 25 years. Despite a last minute $2.6 million donation from former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Castaneda lost decisively. That means that Republicans continue to hold all three seats on the RRC Board which, despite its name, actually regulates the Texas oil and gas industry.

Likely President-elect Biden has pledged that his administration will rejoin the Paris Climate Accords and commit itself to fight climate change. If used properly, Tuesday's results can help him to achieve the more moderate position that his campaign seemed to be suggesting he favored. They show that, across the nation, there is considerably less appetite for radical energy plans than the Progressives would have everybody believe.

Despite the immense increase in the use and availability of natural gas (again owing largely to the Marcellus Shale deposits in places like Pennsylvania), the United States in the last decade has actually cut its CO2 emissions to levels not seen in 30 years. Yet thanks to environmental politics, oil and gas pipelines remain unbuilt, leaving heavily Democratic areas in the northeast dangerously exposed to having insufficient fuel available to meet their still prodigious and largely uncurtailed energy needs. Biden certainly will have to mollify his environmental base, but the election results show that it will be much harder for Democrats in swing districts – and even in all but the bluest areas – to vote in favor of the more extreme elements of the Green New Deal.

ATTORNEYS MENTIONED

Daniel Markind