Energy Could be an Issue in Pennsylvania - If the Republicans Can Run a Campaign

September 29, 2022
Daniel Markind

This article originally ran on Forbes.com on September 29, 2022. All rights reserved.

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.

Pennsylvania is rapidly becoming the ultimate battleground state in American politics. Famously described by Democratic political operative James Carville as Philadelphia in the East, Pittsburgh in the West, and Alabama in the middle, Pennsylvania since the fracking revolution has become the second largest producer of natural gas in the nation. Unlike New York, its neighbor to the north, Pennsylvania has allowed the energy industry to become a major part of its economy, with huge Marcellus Shale deposits located in the southwest around Pittsburgh and the northeast around Scranton driving that growth. Beginning in 2016, when the state went Republican in the presidential election for the first time since 1988, Pennsylvania is also seen as a bellwether state for national politics.

Despite Pennsylvanias huge gas deposits and their production, the relationship between the natural gas industry and the State government has become strained since Tom Wolf became Governor in 2014. Wolf, who came to prominence when he first ran in 2014 thanks to television commercials that claimed he was going to force the energy companies to pay their fair share of taxes, never moved to ban the industry altogether, but he never sought positive relations with it either.

Wolf is now term-limited from seeking reelection, and the Democrats have chosen as his potential successor Attorney General Josh Shapiro (full disclosure: a long time personal acquaintance). Like Wolf, Shapiro has tried to straddle the issue of gas drilling. In his campaign speeches, he isnt shy about mentioning how he took on the frackers, yet he has not advocated shutting down the industry either, and arguably, he was only doing his job as Attorney General by chasing polluters in any industry, fracking included.

Given the energy sectors importance to the full State economy, this might leave an opening for Shapiros opponent, Doug Mastriano. However, before he can seek to take advantage of it, he has to actually get his campaign operation in gear, and there is little time left before the November 8 election to do so. A Republican generally described as far right, Mastriano has been hammered by his extreme positions on issues like abortion (he would ban it without exception), LGBTQ rights (he opposes marriage rights and adoption rights for same sex couples), gun regulation (as a State Senator, he introduced a bill that would ban the enforcement of federal gun laws in Pennsylvania and he supports permitless concealed carry), his decision to wear a Confederate uniform in a photo taken at the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania (which is not far from Gettysburg), and his presence at the United States Capitol on January 6. As a strong conservative, Mastriano presumably would loosen the restrictions on the energy industry in Pennsylvania,

but he has to get into office first. An Allentown newspaper headline described his campaign recently as no TV ads, tiny crowds, little money.

Recent polls show Shapiro ahead by double digits, largely based on social issues. With few indications that Mastriano can make this race competitive, the chance of hearing a real debate on the issues is limited. From an energy perspective, this would be a shame. The energy industry has become hugely important to Pennsylvania and its economy, but oddly it is hardly noticed in the most populous part of the state, the southeast quadrant around Philadelphia. By a geological quirk, there are huge natural gas deposits located underneath much of the rest of Pennsylvania, but not in Philadelphia and its environs. That produces an electorate where the largest bloc of voters by population has no accurate concept of what the energy industry is even about, or how it may be benefiting them economically. Having little personal experience with that industry or anyone employed by it, most people in southeastern Pennsylvania know little more about fracking than what unregulated social media and the local media tell it and, quite frankly, that information tends to be overly didactic and often just wrong . Not surprisingly, the Philadelphia media is generally progressive, with columnists who run remarkably strident columns like this one by Will Bunch of the Philadelphia Inquirer decidedly anti-fracking in theme and focus:

Six weeks before the election, it appears likely that Shapiro will be the next governor and that the same uncomfortable yet somewhat workable relationship will continue to exist between the state government and the energy industry. But not having government and the industry recognize their communality of interests would be a shame. Given the proximity of the Port of Philadelphia to the gas fields, Pennsylvania could play a huge part in alleviating the upcoming natural gas shortage manufactured by Vladimir Putin that is facing Europe this winter. With some forethought, Pennsylvania also could be the nations leader in both expanding our own energy mix to include more renewables, while maintaining our energy grids integrity by providing fossil fuel backup where needed at least until we are better situated to take advantage of the energy generated by renewables and to deliver that energy to the locations where it is most needed. The possibilities are enormous, and would benefit from the robust debate that a political campaign is supposed to provide.

If Mastriano remains unable to generate interest and excitement in his candidacy, and if Shapiro does become the next governor of the Commonwealth, lets hope that the latter is willing and able to think creatively and dramatically about the energy possibilities. Pennsylvania has all the resources to be a world leader in energy now and leading into the future, but it needs strong, savvy, and balanced political leadership to carry it through. Lets hope in November it gets it.