Politics and Fracking: A Case Study of Pennsylvania Elections

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ABSTRACT

Over the past four years, hydraulic fracturing—or 'fracking', the combining of fracturing rock and horizontal drilling to extract oil and natural gas from shale deposits—has evolved into one of the most high-profile political issues in Pennsylvania, the second-highest producer of natural gas in the country. Although fracking began booming in the state around 2008, increased awareness of climate change and the need for urgent climate policy initiatives have facilitated fracking's rise in politicians' campaign agendas in recent years. Meanwhile, narratives highlighting fracking's economic benefits to struggling rural portions of Pennsylvania—and the need for domestic drilling amid geopolitical tensions in Ukraine and the Middle East—have gripped recent political discourse. Consequently, fracking has evolved into a wedge issue between voters who view fracking as a boon for Pennsylvania's economic development and national security and those who view the practice as environmentally destructive and feeding the country's dependence on fossil fuels. With Pennsylvania's growing importance in shaping the national political landscape, the goal of this summative piece is to explore fracking's political and electoral role in Pennsylvania during the 2020 presidential election, 2022 senatorial election, and 2024 presidential election, when fracking served as a key issue during some of the most controversial and consequential elections in recent history.

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I. The 2020 Presidential Election

As the 2020 presidential campaign approached its November end date, and as Pennsylvania appeared as a 'must-win' for then-President Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden, fracking was elevated into a crucial political issue among candidates. With the natural gas industry contributing to rural economies across the state[1]—through royalty checks, employment, and philanthropic investments into rural communities—Trump and Biden's embrace of fracking was predicated on the belief that Pennsylvanians support the practice and would respond to pro-fracking rhetoric. According to a Keiser Family Foundation /

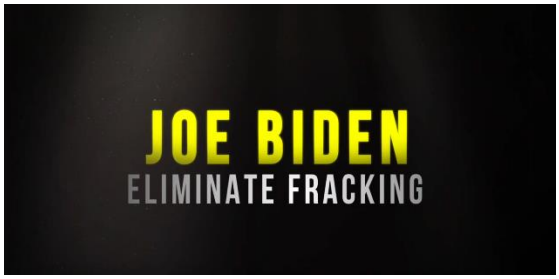
[1] FTI Consulting. "Economic and Fiscal Impact of Pennsylvania Shale Gas Development Approach to Methodology and Results." *Marcellus Shale Coalition*, Aug. 2023; Augustine, John. "Impact Fees and Royalties Help Susquehanna County Community and Residents." *Well Said Coterra*, 3 Jul. 2013.

Cook Political Report poll, in 2019, "57% of swing voters [in Pennsylvania said] a fracking ban is a bad idea."[2] A 2020 Muhlenberg College / Morning Call poll found that over 40% of Pennsylvania voters "disagree with placing a moratorium on fracking in the state."[3]

These campaign strategies were evident during the final presidential debate, when Donald Trump attacked Joe Biden for his previous stances on fracking, warning Pennsylvania voters that Biden would ban the practice if elected: "… he was against fracking. He said it. I will show that to you tomorrow. 'I am against fracking', until he got the nomination, went to Pennsylvania [then] he said … you know what, Pennsylvania? He'll be against it very soon because his party is totally against it."[4]

To further portray Joe Biden as a threat to fracking and the Pennsylvania economy, Trump released a campaign ad days before the election. Eerie background music complemented the threatening messages which billowed on the screen, including, "Joe Biden will end fracking" and "Western Pennsylvania will lose hundreds of thousands of jobs." The ad ended with the warning: "[A Biden fracking ban is] the end of a lot of livelihoods."[5]

Other pro-Trump ads echoed a similar message, warning Joe Biden's position on fracking would eliminate Pennsylvania jobs and decimate the state's economy.



Source: America First Action Super PAC. "Impact." YouTube, June 19, 2020.



Source: America First Action Super PAC. "Sick." YouTube, October 23, 2020.

For his part, Biden refuted Trump's claims, positioning himself as a pro-fracking moderate attempting to appeal to blue collar workers in rural districts as well as more environmentally conscious voters in the state's urban districts, such as Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.[6] While Biden did reiterate his prior statement that fracking should be prohibited on federal land, he argued: "I have never said I oppose fracking … I do rule out banning fracking because the answer we need … we need other industries to transition to get to, ultimately, a complete zero emissions by 2025. What I will do with fracking over time is make sure that we can capture the emissions from the fracking…"[7]

[2] "A Year from 2020 Election, Polling in Four Former 'Blue Wall' States – Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin – Finds President Trump Is Voters' Biggest Motivator." *KFF*, 7 Nov. 2019.
[3] Cole, John. "Pro-Trump Pac Hits Biden on Fracking and Coal." *PoliticsPA*, June 9, 2020; "Muhlenberg College/Morning Call Pennsylvania Presidential Election Survey: February 2020." *Muhlenberg College*, 2020.
[4] Trump, Donald. "Debate Transcript: Trump, Biden Final Presidential Debate Moderated by Kristen Welker." *USA Today*, 23 Oct. 2020.
[5] Trump, Donald. "Joe Biden Will Ban Fracking and Destroy the Energy Industry." *YouTube*, 23 Oct. 2020.
[6] Friedman, Lisa. "Trump's 'Frack' Attack on Biden Seems to Be Falling Short." *New York Times*, 18 Oct. 2020.
[7] Biden, Joe. "Debate Transcript: Trump, Biden Final Presidential Debate Moderated by Kristen Welker." *USA Today*, 23 Oct. 2020.

Despite Trump's warnings of looming economic doom in Pennsylvania if Biden was elected, Trump narrowly lost the state by less than two percentage points.[8] Trump's appeal to rural portions of the state likely to be more receptive to fracking was insufficient in counteracting the Democratic election returns of urban, more densely populated regions of Pennsylvania, where climate change and renewable energy are typically viewed as more salient issues.

Fracking may not have been the sole issue in Pennsylvania's 2020 presidential election, but it proved crucial enough to dominate the news cycle[9] while forcing Biden to consistently play defence on an issue so tightly wound into Pennsylvania's political fabric.

II. **The 2022 Senate Race**

Donald Trump may have lost Pennsylvania, despite his onslaught of attacks on Joe Biden and Democrats on fracking. However, that does not mean the issue took a back seat during the 2022 consequential senate race. With the retirement of Republican Senator Patrick Toomey, Democrats sought to gain his seat in the Senate chamber. GOP nominee Mehmet Oz, more commonly known as his TV name, "Dr. Oz," and then-Lieutenant Governor John Fetterman, a Democrat, faced off in the high-stakes general election. Just as in 2020, fracking emerged as a consequential topic. Both candidates used their claimed support of fracking as a wedge issue in an effort to differentiate themselves from one another, appeal to rural portions of the state which economically benefit from drilling, and distance themselves from their previously critical comments of the practice.

On his official campaign website, Oz framed natural gas as both an economic and domestic energy issue, arguing:

"Pennsylvania is a leader in the production of natural gas and coal. The Biden Administration has launched an attack on the energy industry stifling domestic energy production and weakening the U.S. position in energy production. These attacks have resulted in skyrocketing gas and energy prices and made our current energy options less reliable. Dr. Oz will work to overturn these heavy-handed regulations that are hurting Pennsylvania jobs and our local communities."[10]

During a debate just days before the general election, Oz reiterated his support for fracking, attempting to contrast his position with Fetterman's:

"I've been very consistent. Fracking has been demonstrated, it's a very old technology, to be safe. It is a lifeline for this commonwealth to be able to build wealth similar to what they've been able to achieve in other states. For that reason, I strongly support fracking, drilling, the piping of that natural gas … John Fetterman calls fracking a stain on Pennsylvania. He says that he will sign a moratorium to ban its continued use. He's against pipelines … He supports Biden's desire to ban fracking on public lands, which are our lands, all of our lands together … If we unleashed our energy here in Pennsylvania, it would help everybody. Why John Fetterman is so rigidly stuck on fighting against energy companies is stunning to me because it's the jobs I want, tens of thousands of high paying jobs to help Pennsylvanians."[11]

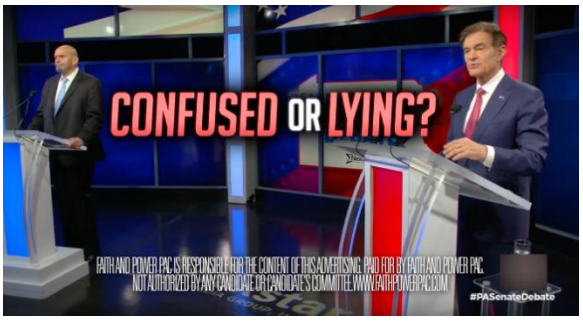
Fetterman also discussed his views on fracking in the debate:

"I've always supported fracking and I always believe that independence with our energy is critical. We can't be held ransom to somebody like Russia … I've never taken any money from their industry, but I support how critical it is

[8] "Election Results." *Politico*, 6 Jan. 2021.
[9] Levy, Marc. "Trump Intensifies Fracking Assault on Biden in Pennsylvania." *AP News*, 25 Oct. 2020; Sokolove, Michael. "Will Trump Win Pennsylvania Again?" *New York Times*, 10 Sep. 2020.
[10] Oz, Mehmet. "Energy Independence." *Dr. Oz U.S. Senate Webpage*.
[11] Oz, Mehmet. "U.S. Senate Debate between Mehmet Oz and John Fetterman." *Rev*, 26 Oct. 2022.

that we produce our own energy and create energy independence."[12]

However, both candidates' professed support for fracking contrasted with their prior public remarks. In 2018, Fetterman revealed that he does not "support fracking at all and I never have."[13] Moreover, Fetterman signed a 2016 pledge ratifying his support for a fracking moratorium in Pennsylvania.[14] Oz and his co-author previously wrote in 2014 that "[w]e wonder how eager the leaders of the natural gas industry would be to drink well water from a farm next to one of their drilling sites" and "... everyone would be best served by the policy adopted in New York state: No fracking until results of a state department of health study become available."[15] He is also listed as a co-author of a 2015 article with the sarcastic title: "Surprise! Fracking May Cause Birth Defects."[16]



Attack ad against John Fetterman for his flip flopping over the issue of fracking. Source: "F&PPAC 'Fracking' 30s - PA." YouTube, 2022.

Oz and Fetterman's purported turnaround signalled the potential political importance of supporting the natural gas industry in Pennsylvania and the liability of maintaining negative fracking viewpoints. A 2022 poll revealed that nearly half of Pennsylvania residents supported natural gas extraction.[17] Consequently, the candidates' emphasis on fracking, particularly as election day loomed, is emblematic of the belief that securing victory in Pennsylvania required commitment to the natural gas industry. In both 2020 and 2022, it was the Democratic candidates playing defence, fighting relentless attacks from their Republican challengers on the issue. However, just as in 2020, the Democrats prevailed. Fetterman defeated Oz by nearly five percentage points.

III. **The 2024 Presidential Election**

As of this writing, the 2024 presidential election between former president Donald Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris is in its final weeks. For Trump and Harris, Pennsylvania is a must-win state. "It's hard to see a path to the White House for either candidate that doesn't run through Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania is crucial when it comes to the electoral map,"[18] *CBS News*' chief election and campaign correspondent recently remarked.

Although this paper does not benefit from hindsight in its exploration of fracking and the 2024 election, natural gas extraction has emerged as a prominent issue for both political campaigns in Pennsylvania. Similarly to the 2020 presidential election and the 2022 senate race, both candidates view opposition to fracking as a potential losing position. During their first, and possibly only, presidential debate, Trump portrayed Harris as anti-fracking and as a candidate whose presidency would harm Pennsylvania's natural gas industry. Harris, running for president in 2019, did endorse a ban on fracking,[19] but has shifted to a pro-fracking candidate. Ms. Harris defended her pro-

[12] Fetterman, John. "U.S. Senate Debate between Mehmet Oz and John Fetterman." *Rev*, 26 Oct. 2022.
[13] Fetterman, John. "Joy Marie Mann - Savage Joy with Mayor John Fetterman Who Is Running for PA Lt Gov." *YouTube*, May 15, 2018.
[14] Kaczynski, Andrew, and Olivia Alafriz. "John Fetterman Said He's 'Always Supported' Fracking – He Previously Said 'I Don't' and 'Never Have'." *CNN*, 18 Oct. 2022.
[15] Oz, Mehmet, and Mike Roizen. "Why Fracking Needs to Wait for Results of Health Studies." *HT Health*, 21 Oct. 2014.
[16] Oz, Mehmet, and Mike Roizen. "Surprise! Fracking May Cause Birth Defects." *Newsmax*, 9 Jan. 2015.
[17] "Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion & Sustainability Studies Program | 2022 Pennsylvania Climate and Energy Survey." *Muhlenberg College*, 2022.
[18] Costa, Robert, and Jon Delano. "Pennsylvania is the Key to the White House, Chief CBS News Elections Correspondent Says." *CBS News*, 27 Sep. 2024.
[19] Harris, Kamala. "Kamala Harris Discusses Fracking at CNN Town Hall." *YouTube*, 9 Oct. 2019.

fracking stance during an August CNN interview shortly after her Democratic Party nomination,[20] as well as in the debate where she argued:

"... let's talk about fracking because we're here in Pennsylvania. I made that very clear in 2020. I will not ban fracking. I have not banned fracking as Vice President of the United States. And, in fact, I was the tie-breaking vote on the Inflation Reduction Act, which opened new leases for fracking..."[21]

Similarly to the 2020 presidential election against Biden, Trump has unleashed an onslaught of attacks against Harris for her previous positions on fracking, releasing an ad warning of impending job cuts and rises in energy prices if Harris is elected and bans the practice.



Trump advertisement warning voters about Harris's purported stance on fracking. Source: X (formerly Twitter), Sep. 11, 2024.

It is unclear the effectiveness of these attacks or defences presented by the Trump and Harris campaigns in persuading voters. It is also unclear whether fracking will be a focal point for voters in the 2024 election, as other pertinent issues, such as abortion, inflation, and threats to democracy, loom over the electorate. Retrospective analyses dissecting the eventual electoral outcome will be an important post-election effort.

Moreover, a critical event of note is the recent pullback of drilling in Pennsylvania amid persistently low natural gas prices.[22] For example, one of the most prolific fracking companies in Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania, Coterra Energy, recently announced a pause on new drilling.[23] Post-election analyses should examine any electoral consequences due to the reduction in fracking and subsequent economic fallout from such a pause—for instance, does the electorate blame the incumbent administration for low natural gas prices, decreases in fracking activity, and potential reductions in employment?

IV. **Conclusion**

No matter its salience, and no matter the actual benefits of fracking to the state, candidates' calculations reveal pro-fracking positions have greater political value than anti-fracking stances across 2020, 2022 and 2024 federal elections. Evidence in my own research suggests that to many constituents—including in fracking-intensive rural regions—fracking is not a critical political issue. However, to some residents whose livelihoods have been either positively impacted by drilling (by, for example, industry employment or receiving royalty checks) or negatively affected (by, for instance, polluted water, air quality concerns, or adverse health effects), fracking may indeed shape their voting behaviour. Although fracking was not a significant political issue in Pennsylvania's 2022 gubernatorial election—possibly due to the unfavorability of the Republican nominee and concerns over his reportedly radical policy ideas—some voters for Democrat Josh Shapiro, who, as Attorney General, criminally charged a fracking company with polluting

[20] Liptak, Kevin. "Harris Explains in Exclusive CNN Interview Why She's Shifted Her Position on Key Issues Since Her First Run for President." CNN, 29 Aug. 2024.
[21] Harris, Kamala, and Riley Hoffman. "READ: Harris-Trump Presidential Debate Transcript." *ABC News*, 11 Sep. 2024.
[22] Phillips, Susan. "Fracking in Pennsylvania Hasn't Gone as Well as Some May Think." *WHYY*, 1 Oct. 2024; *Natural Gas Quarterly Update: Q2 April to June 2024*. Pennsylvania Independent Fiscal Office, 2024.
[23] SA Transcripts. "Coterra Energy Inc. (CTRA) Barclays 38th Annual CEO Energy-Power Conference (Transcript)." Seeking Alpha, 4 Sep. 2024; "Coterra Stops Drilling New Wells in Marcellus, Fracking Ends Soon." *Marcellus Drilling News*, 10 Sep. 2024.

residents' water,[24] viewed Shapiro's reversal on fracking as a stab in the back.

Ultimately, fracking is not going away anytime soon, at least as a federal election issue. Interestingly, fracking has not gained traction among local campaigns in Pennsylvania. While it is challenging to speculate why, one reason may be the emergence of other pressing issues facing local communities and the state, such as COVID recovery and abortion rights. Additional academic research and polling is required to understand why fracking emerges in some elections and not others. In the meantime, the 2020, 2022, and 2024 election cycles prove that as long as there is fracking, there is controversy.

[24] "AG Shapiro and 43rd Statewide Grand Jury File Criminal Charges against NEPA Fracking Company." *Pennsylvania Attorney General*, 15 June 2020.