

After the Polls Closed

In this issue, Operation Wildfire shares a few observations about Election 2023 and reviews Centre County election results. This may get a bit wonky, but we wanted to offer our thoughts prior to the official start of Election 2024.

What We Learned from Election 2023

- Scare tactics still work. This year, those tactics targeted our rights – from reproductive rights and healthcare to voting rights, free and fair elections, even democracy. Repeat the mantra often enough and voters begin to believe their rights may be eroded.
- The 2023 elections proved once again that a race centered on abortion can be won. In fact, in every election since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, Americans have voted to increase abortion rights. This is true even in otherwise red states such as Ohio, Kentucky and Montana.¹ To take that one step further, more than 60 percent of Americans believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases.² Pennsylvania voters forgot (or didn't know) that in our Commonwealth, nothing has changed – abortion remains legal to the *Roe* standard of 24 weeks or longer if the life of the mother is in danger.
- Popularity and redistricting also affect election outcomes. In Virginia redistricting resulted in more solidly Democratic districts than solidly Republican ones. But redistricting was offset by the popularity of Virginia's Republican Governor, Glenn Youngkin. A recent poll³ found that 54% of Virginians approve of the Governor's job performance and 39% disapprove. Only 43% of the same respondents thought President Biden was doing a good job, while 55% didn't. This helped Republican candidates grab districts that normally would have gone to the Democrats, and gave control, by slim majorities, to the Democrats in both the Virginia State Senate and State House.
- This election highlighted the Democrats' organizational and fundraising prowess, enabling them to outspend Republicans in most key states, including Pennsylvania, heading into Election Day.⁴
- Messaging does matter, especially on sensitive issues such as abortion and in response to statements that simply are not true. To change hearts and minds, candidates must communicate effectively on issues important to the voters.
- One of the old dictums of politics – all politics is local – appears to have been thrown out the window.⁵ Potholes and police, the traditional staples of municipal campaigns, have been overtaken by issues that are not within the control of our local elected officials. The swing to national issues in municipal campaigns has nothing to do with improving the daily lives of people in our communities.
- Nationalizing elections and extensive use of social media may be successful tactics for today's campaigns; however, they are not standalone. Face-to-face voter contact is still critical, combined with a solid ad campaign that includes social media, print and electronic advertising. Knocking on doors does matter.
- Imposing term limits on members of the U.S. Congress (Senate and House) does not solve the "deep state" challenge. As recently exhibited in a ceasefire letter to President Biden signed by 400 government employees and the 200-person demonstration at the Democratic National Committee headquarters, there are employees within the federal government who believe that they run the show.

¹ The New Republic, November 13, 2023

² Pew Research Center, January 11, 2023

³ Washington Post/Schar School poll, October 16, 2023

⁴ Politico.com, November 7, 2023

⁵ Ibid.

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Many of these employees were not elected, they were appointed. With a change in Administration, many of the appointees applied for and moved into non-appointed, government service positions.

- Litmus tests do not have a place in the party of Abraham Lincoln or in the big tent of Ronald Reagan. Republicans will have challenges winning future elections if they do not appeal to ALL Republicans and to Independent/Unaffiliated voters.
- A cursory review of Centre County election results showed that Republican candidates outpolled Democrats in every single statewide and countywide race at the in-person voting booth on Election Day. In some cases by a very wide margin. But mail-in ballots, once again, propelled Democrat candidates to victory. Operation Wildfire sources revealed that the same thing happened in other Pennsylvania counties. New Jersey Republicans had the best chance in years to regain control of their state legislature but mail-in ballots struck again.⁶ No-excuse mail-in balloting has irrevocably changed things, and Election Day no longer counts as it once did.
- To remain competitive, the Republican Party should embrace mail-in ballots. State legislators should, however, ensure checks and balances are in place to promote confidence in the process. County boards of elections must ensure procedures are in place to comply with the law and to ensure that all mail-in applications and voted ballots are in fact valid.
- The population of Americans who cast ballots in 2023 won't be the same that turns out in 2024. "Off-year" voters appear to have become more reliably Democrat while Republican turnout increases in presidential years. But neither party should take anything for granted. All you need to do is look at the polls ... and the election results over the last few years.

Coming Next?

Let's Go Polling!

Polls are estimates – ideally, very good estimates. The margin of error is a range that tells you how close that estimate gets to reflecting the results that would have happened had everyone been interviewed. Generally speaking, the smaller the margin of error, the better the estimate. But that's not all. Watch your email for our next issue.

⁶ Politico.com, November 8, 2023

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Centre County Election Results

Total Registered Voters: 100,759

Ballots Cast: 39,552 (11,062 absentee/mail-in and 28,404 election day)

Voter Turnout: 39%

The Pennsylvania Courts:

Justice of the Supreme Court	Daniel McCaffery (D)
Judge of the Superior Court	Jill Beck (D) and Timika Lane (D)
Judge of the Commonwealth Court	Matt Wolf (D)
Judge of the Court of Common Pleas	Julia Rater (D)
Retention: Superior Court Judges	Jack Panella (D) and Victor Stabile (R)

Centre County Leadership:

Commissioners	Mark Higgins (D)	Amber Concepcion (D)	Steve Dershem (R)
Controller	Jason Moser (D)		
Sheriff	Bryan Sampsel (R)		
Treasurer	Colleen Kennedy (D)		
Prothonotary	Jeremy Breon (D)		
Recorder of Deeds	Joe Davidson (R)		
Register of Wills	Christine Millinder (R)		
Coroner	Scott Sayers (D)		

School Board Elections:

As expected, only the State College Area School District chose to give control to the Democrats.

Bellefonte

Jennifer Barnhart
Kimberly Weaver
Tim Kessling
Patrick Buck
Donna Smith

Bald Eagle

Erica Danneker and Molly Hoover – Region 2
Jason Penland and Brandi Bartley – Region 3
Amanda Hepfer – Region 1

Penns Valley

Domer Smeltzer
Dan Hall
Kim Kellerman-Domin
Scott Butler

Philipsburg Osceola

Timothy Bainer – District 1
Todd Jeffries – District 2
Alexander Boumerhi – District 4

State College Area School District

Amy Bader
Gretchen Brandt
Anne Demo
Aaron Miller
Daniel Kolbe