

# The New York Times

## Pennsylvania Stakes Its Claim as Center of the Political Universe

Few states feature as many high-stakes, competitive races, each pulsing with the political currents that are shaping midterm campaigns across the country.

By Katie Glueck

Sept. 2, 2022

WILKES-BARRE, Pa. — Pennsylvania, the site of crucial victories and devastating defeats for both political parties in recent elections, has emerged as the nation's center of political gravity and its ultimate battleground as peak campaign season arrives.

Perhaps no other state features as many high-stakes, competitive races, each pulsing with political currents shaping midterm campaigns across the country. The open race for governor between a right-wing political outsider and a veteran of the Democratic establishment may determine both the future of abortion rights and of free and fair elections in a large presidential swing state.

The personality-driven, increasingly ugly Senate contest — shaped by clashes over celebrity and elitism, crime and crudités, and a candidate's health — could decide control of the chamber.

And in races up and down the ballot, Pennsylvania is poised to test whether the political realignment of the Trump era can hold, after the moderate Philadelphia suburbs overwhelmingly rejected the former president's brand of politics, while many white working-class voters abandoned the Democrats to embrace him.

It's no surprise, then, that President Biden, whose 2020 success in Pennsylvania propelled him to the White House, delivered two speeches in the state this week, lashing Trumpism as an urgent threat to the nation in Philadelphia and also speaking in Wilkes-Barre, a northeastern city in politically competitive Luzerne County. He is expected in Pittsburgh on Monday for a Labor Day appearance.

Former President Donald J. Trump, who in 2016 became the first Republican presidential nominee to win Pennsylvania in nearly three decades, is also kicking off the unofficial start to the general election in the state. He's scheduled to appear in the Wilkes-Barre area on Saturday for a rally with Republican candidates. It is his first major public appearance since the F.B.I. searched his Palm Beach, Fla., home.

"It's always a heavily contested state in presidential elections as well as statewide elections, and this year, we happen to have two of the biggest races in the country," said Senator Bob Casey, Democrat of Pennsylvania. "The nation's watching to see what will happen."

In a sprawling, politically complex place where voters historically have often elevated consensus-minded statewide candidates, state Attorney General Josh Shapiro, a Democrat, is running for governor against State Senator Doug Mastriano, the right-wing, election-denying Republican nominee who strenuously opposes abortion rights.

The Senate race has pitted Lt. Gov. John Fetterman, a shorts-wearing, social media-savvy official who is recovering from a stroke, against Dr. Mehmet Oz, the celebrity television physician.

The Democratic candidates have led in fund-raising and the polls. But party and campaign officials expect both races to tighten, given the closely divided nature of the state.

That may especially be the case in the Senate race, as a flood of money from national groups comes in to support Dr. Oz (Mr. Fetterman has benefited from outside spending too), and as voters think about political control of Washington, beyond their attitudes toward individual candidates. Many voters remain furious about the cost of living, and are inclined to take it out on the party in power.

“Have you gone food shopping lately? Have you filled your car with gas?” said Sue Sullivan, 61, in an interview on Biden Street in Scranton, Pa., the city of the president’s birth. “Nothing is going well.”

### The State of the 2022 Midterm Elections

With the primaries winding down, both parties are starting to shift their focus to the general election on Nov. 8.

Battleground Pennsylvania: Few states feature as many high-stakes, competitive races as Pennsylvania, which has emerged as the nation’s center of political gravity.

The Dobbs Decision’s Effect: Since the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, the number of women signing up to vote has surged in some states and the once-clear signs of a Republican advantage are hard to see.

How a G.O.P. Haul Vanished: Last year, the campaign arm of Senate Republicans was smashing fund-raising records. Now, most of the money is gone.

Digital Pivot: At least 10 G.O.P. candidates in competitive races have updated their websites to minimize their ties to former President Donald J. Trump or to adjust their stances on abortion.

Ms. Sullivan, a Republican from Garnet Valley, Pa., said she was unenthusiastic about the Republican nominees but intended to back them anyway.

“With the way the country’s going, I would probably vote for a Republican I didn’t like versus voting for a Democrat that I did like,” she said.

As of Friday, the average gas price in Pennsylvania was \$4.04 a gallon, according to AAA — less than the average a month ago, but still more than the \$3.29 of a year ago. The state’s unemployment rate in July was 4.3 percent, higher than the national rate but slightly lower than that of states including New York.

There are signs of an improving political environment for Democrats.

Outrage over the overturning of Roe v. Wade has helped them close a once-yawning enthusiasm gap. While Mr. Biden has suffered months of abysmal approval ratings, his numbers are ticking up. Mr. Trump, who has strongly unfavorable ratings, has re-emerged in the headlines thanks to the F.B.I. effort to retrieve classified documents from his home. And in several key Senate races, Republican candidates have stumbled.

In Pennsylvania, where Mr. Fetterman has a strong personal brand, the Democrat has used his prolific social media presence to cast Dr. Oz as an out-of-touch carpetbagger more at home in New Jersey, which had been his longtime principal residence, than in Pennsylvania, where he says he now lives. Mr.

Fetterman has maintained a light public schedule since his stroke in May, but he has kept up an active presence on the airwaves, and there are signs that the messaging has resonated.

“Fetterman is like for the working man,” said Robert Thompson, 63, a retired firefighter and passionate defender of Mr. Biden’s, in an interview this week across the street from the office of the Republican Party of Luzerne County. “Dr. Oz, that’s Mr. Hollywood.”

Dr. Oz is trying to paint Mr. Fetterman as a far-left Democrat who is soft on crime. Mr. Fetterman has released his own ad stressing his public safety bona fides, a sign that the issue has the potential to become a flash point in the race.

The Republican Dr. Oz, trained as a heart surgeon, and his campaign, have begun to mock Mr. Fetterman over the pace of his recovery, offering pointed debate “concessions,” like a promise to pay for additional medical personnel. A spokeswoman said that if Mr. Fetterman “had ever eaten a vegetable in his life, then maybe he wouldn’t have had a major stroke.”

In an interview on MSNBC this week, Mr. Fetterman — who has said that he almost died — blasted the Oz campaign for appealing “to folks that get their jollies, you know, making fun of the stroke dude.”

“I might miss a word every now and then, or I might mush two words together,” he said, but stressed that he was expected to make a full recovery.

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Mr. Fetterman is still using closed captions for interviews and other business conducted by video, his spokesman, Joe Calvello, confirmed, saying that it “helps him keep conversations moving fast.” A number of Democrats have argued that his health scare is a relatable episode for many voters.

But his decision to decline a debate next week has brought questions about his health back into public focus.

“Mr. Fetterman has to show a presence so that he can show people that he’s healthy and he’s able to fill that position without a health issue,” said Mayor George C. Brown of Wilkes-Barre, adding that he expected Mr. Fetterman, whom he supports, would do so more visibly as the race unfolds. “Come out, do some rallies, talk to people.”

“Unfortunately, the way that some of this campaigning is going, it shows that there’s an issue with Mr. Fetterman’s health, and I can’t say that, because I’ve never really spoken to the man,” he added in a Wednesday interview.

Mr. Calvello, the Fetterman spokesman, said that the candidate was pursuing an increasingly busy campaign schedule, though he stopped short of committing to debating.

“John has been and will continue to be open about his health and his struggles with auditory processing,” Mr. Calvello said. “He is going to be doing more and more events and will continue to draw large crowds.”

Mr. Fetterman is planning a “Women for Fetterman” rally in the Philadelphia suburbs for next Sunday — which is Sept. 11 — focused on abortion rights.

After the overturning of Roe vs. Wade, which handed control over abortion rights back to the states, the matter has become a top-tier issue in major races, including in Pennsylvania. The state has a Republican-led legislature and Mr. Shapiro has cast himself as a bulwark against any effort to enact the kind of bans that have taken hold in other states.

Abortion has been a major focus in the governor's race as Mr. Shapiro works to brand Mr. Mastriano as far too extreme for the state. Mr. Shapiro has so far spent \$18 million on television advertising this year, his campaign said, with plans for a significant fall advertising campaign.

Mr. Mastriano's campaign, which rarely engages with mainstream media outlets, did not respond to a request for comment. As of Thursday, Mr. Mastriano had not been on the airwaves in the general election, according to AdImpact. The Republican Governors Association has also not yet reserved airtime to boost Mr. Mastriano.

A growing number of Republicans have announced their support for Mr. Shapiro, with some citing their concerns about Mr. Mastriano's efforts to spread lies about the 2020 election and warning of the threat they believe he poses to a state that is home to the birthplace of American democracy.

But for all of Mr. Mastriano's structural challenges, and scrutiny over incidents like his appearance in a Confederate uniform or backing from an antisemitic ally, the race may wind up being highly competitive.

**"The real professionals know it's going to be very tough," Shanin Specter, a Philadelphia lawyer and son of the late Senator Arlen Specter, said. Mr. Shapiro, he said, was meeting the race with appropriate seriousness. But he warned that some live in an "echo chamber" and believe "Shapiro couldn't possibly lose. And they're just dead wrong."**

Mr. Casey, the senator, suggested that Mr. Mastriano's ascent in the Republican Party indicated that "few, if any" of the state's successful former Republican governors would have won the nomination today.

Indeed, the G.O.P. has been increasingly remade in the image of Mr. Trump, who will rally Saturday in a county that he flipped in 2016.

Pennsylvania "plays an important part in both the former president's history and narrative as well as the current president's," said David Urban, a Republican strategist who helped run Mr. Trump's Pennsylvania operation in 2016.

Nodding to the possibility that both Mr. Biden and Mr. Trump may seek the presidency in 2024, he added, "Past may be prologue here. You may see both the former president and the current president duking it out in Pennsylvania again."