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## **Mother Nature at the Polls**

Mother Nature is now firmly at home in middle America, and politicians from both sides of the aisle better get used to seeing her at their constituents' kitchen tables. Politicians reckless enough to insult her may find themselves ushered out the door.

The November 7 election results confirmed that mainstream, centrist voters care about environmental and energy issues. And at the same time they welcomed Mother Nature into the set of core values by which they measure candidates, they also rejected ideological extremes.

Voters remade the political landscape in the 2006 elections. Nationally, Democrats ended 12 years of wandering in the wilderness and regained control of both chambers of the U.S. Congress and 28 of the 50 governors' mansions. Because of that change, Senator Barbara Boxer (League of Conservation Voters (LCV) score – 100) will now head the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, unseating former chair Senator James Inhofe (LCV score - 0). Representative Nick Rahall (LCV score – 92) takes the chair of the House Resources Committee from Richard Pombo (LCV score – 17), who was also defeated by the voters.

Here in Pennsylvania the big political news was the magnitude of incumbent Senator Rick Santorum's loss at the hands of Bob Casey. Rarely in United States political history has a 12-year incumbent suffered such a lopsided defeat. Casey's platform featured some key environmental issues. He came out early in the campaign for mandatory caps on carbon dioxide emissions, against drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), for a national requirement for electricity providers to get more of their energy from renewable resources and for requiring automakers to produce cars that get better gas mileage.

Governor Rendell cruised to re-election and made his environmental record one of the centerpieces of his campaign. His stump speeches, his campaign literature and his press releases all featured his renewable energy policies, including the passage of the Alternative Energy Portfolio Standards Act and more funding for energy efficiency and renewables through Energy Harvest and the

Pennsylvania Energy Development Authority. He also included the passage of Growing Greener as one of his signature environmental accomplishments.

Governor Rendell now has an opportunity to cement his place in history as the Energy and Environment Governor by pushing through a powerful energy conservation, renewable energy, and global warming agenda.

When the new Pennsylvania House of Representatives convenes in January, it will be narrowly controlled by either the Democrats or Republicans and nobody will know for sure until one still undecided seat is settled. It also could be the greenest legislative body in the history of the Commonwealth, with as many as 10 more seats represented by pro-environment members than in the current House.

Most of the competitive House races were located in southeastern Pennsylvania where environmental issues are a major consideration for voters weighing the merits of a candidate. In that region of the state, Democrats picked up three House seats, defeating three Republicans with mediocre or poor environmental records.

Overall the Democrats picked up nine state house seats and lost two for a net gain of seven, but that could become eight, depending on the 156<sup>th</sup> district in West Chester, where absentee and provisional votes are still being counted. Indeed, whether the Republicans or Democrats control the House, may hinge on the final results in West Chester.

The Republican incumbents in the southeast who held onto their seats did so partly by running on environmental and energy platforms. For example, the Democrats targeted two state Senate seats – an open seat, and one held by an incumbent. Both of those seats were won by Republicans who have had excellent environmental voting records.

One interesting twist this election produced is an influx of conservative Republicans who rode into office on the wave of voter revulsion against the legislative pay raise and won primaries last spring. If these Republicans hold firm to ex-

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treme right-wing views and insist on ideological purity, they will be swimming straight against the tide of public sentiment that favors moderate, centrist views and wants an end to partisan confrontations. Republicans in the politically competitive southeast part of the state would be committing political suicide by allowing these new members of their caucus to set their agenda.

Several years ago, one legislator was heard describing environmental advocates as the “earring and Birkenstock crowd.” The members of the new General Assembly that convenes a new session in January should understand that Mother Nature’s image has matured and become mainstream. She’s now in pumps, and can be found in the pew of a church on Sunday morning. One thing remains the same, though – it’s not nice to fool Mother Nature.

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