

Fracking and the Rightward Shift of Working Class Voters

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Pennsylvania is the one purple state in which fracking has flourished. This has rendered the technique as much a political question as a practical one. Fracking has deepened the schism between Democrats and Republicans.[i]

There has been a rightward shift in Pennsylvania's voter registration statistics that has been traced to shifts in the affiliation of working class communities, particularly those located in the northeastern and southwestern parts of the state. These shifting party loyalties have been attributed to class, culture, de-industrialization, economics, immigration, institutional failure, political isolation, loneliness, race, religion, resentment, rural consciousness, status loss, or some combination of these factors. There really is no shortage of culprits.

Some new research offers a more direct cause: the decline of coal mining and the rise of shale gas development. This research argues that many traditional Democrats blamed the Democratic Party's support for environmental regulation for the decline in coal production and the economic consequences that followed, and consequently started voting for Republicans.[ii] The main argument is that when voters could not see firsthand the switch from coal to gas in power generation, it was simple for Republicans and interest groups to blame environmental regulations as the reason that coal production declined and that local economies collapsed. Coal-turned-fracking communities in the northeast, and particularly the southwest, experienced this transition.

Fracking has thus become politically and culturally symbolic for many Pennsylvania voters—a means of restoring a dignified life for smaller, more rural communities that have struggled. An advertisement aired during the 2020 campaign by the pro-Trump super PAC America First Action used an oil and gas worker to put it succinctly. “When Joe Biden says he’d eliminate fracking, he’s talking about my job; he’s talking about our future.”[iii] The choice is between supporting local communities or protecting the environment from unknown or future risks, and serves as shorthand for the different values held by working class and non-working class voters.

Fracking Attitudes: What do the Data Show?

Public attitudes toward natural gas extraction have shifted and become polarized, although being nearer to natural gas development affects partisan perceptions. More voters in 2024 felt the economic benefits of natural gas development outweighed the environmental risks of fracking. This is a change from 2020, when more voters thought the environmental risks were larger than the economic benefits. This is also a change from surveys prior to 2020 when there was no clear consensus about risks and benefits.[iv]

Partisan feelings about the economic benefits and environmental harms have diverged over time. Initially, partisan differences were narrow but now they are markedly different. Feelings about the economic benefits and environmental harms of fracking differ geographically with partisans living in counties that have a history of drilling being more inclined to believe the economic benefits outweigh the environmental harms (Figure 1).^[v] While Republicans in general are more supportive of the economic benefits of fracking, those in counties with a history of active development are more supportive than Republicans in counties without fracking. Similarly, while Democrats in general are less likely to believe the economic benefits outweigh the environmental risks, Democrats in fracking counties are more likely than Democrats in counties without any fracking activity to believe the benefits outweigh the risks.

Fracking economic benefits outweigh environmental risks

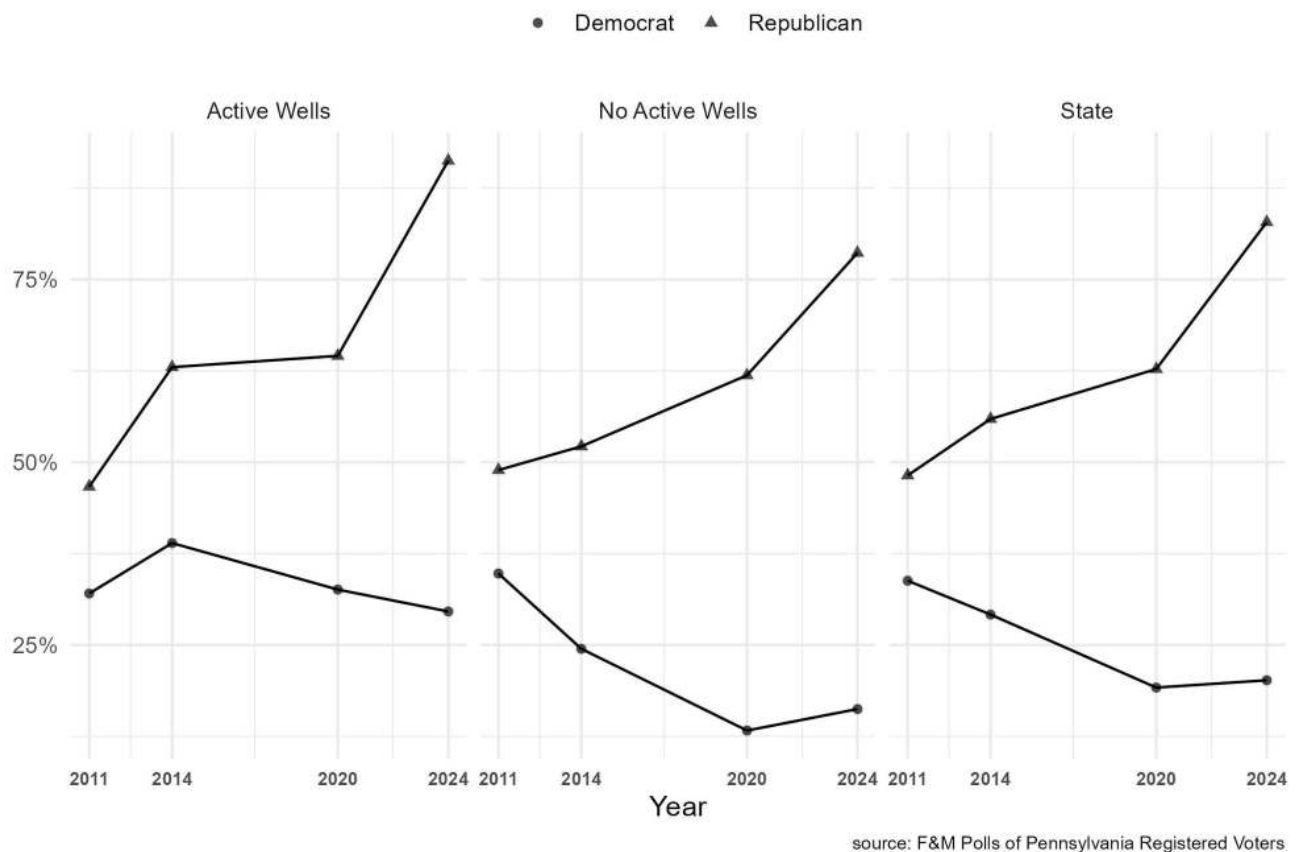


Figure 1. *Partisan Perceptions of the Economic Benefits of Fracking in Pennsylvania by County-Level Fracking Activity.* This figure displays the share of Republicans (triangles) and Democrats (dots) between 2011 and 2024 who believed the economic benefits of shale gas development outweighed the potential environmental risks. The panels show respondents in communities with active well drilling, with no active drilling, and for the state as a whole.

Given the attitudinal differences and perhaps the cultural stakes, party registration has changed dramatically in counties with a history of active wells and even more sharply in counties with the most active fracking. Democratic registrations have declined by 18 and 32

percent while Republican registrations have increased by 31 and 39 percent since 2000 in these areas (Table 1).^[vi]

Table 1. Party Registration by County-Level Fracking Activity.

	Registration	County Fracking Activity (2011)		
		No Wells	Active Wells	Most Active
2000	Dem	2,271,623	1,305,369	159,312
	Rep	2,271,119	831,365	148,280
	D %	44.5%	55.7%	47.5%
	R %	44.5%	35.5%	44.2%
	Total	5,103,043	2,343,339	335,615
2024	Dem	2,814,664	1,067,772	108,945
	Rep	2,415,064	1,089,397	205,829
	D %	44.8%	42.4%	30.0%
	R %	38.5%	43.3%	56.8%
	Total	6,280,654	2,518,655	362,669
Change	Voters	23.1%	7.5%	8.1%
	Dem Reg	23.9%	-18.2%	-31.6%
	Rep Reg	6.3%	31.0%	38.8%

Fracking and Political Views

Making a direct link between natural gas development and changing voter registration and voting preferences is difficult to do without data that follows an individual's attitudes and behaviors over a long period of time. But the data presented in the research cited earlier, in our own surveys, and in the state's voter registration figures provide at least some circumstantial evidence that natural gas development is part of the story behind the state's political reshuffling in recent years.

The dynamics of natural gas and coal markets help perpetuate the stereotypes voters have about the parties. Coal jobs are much more concentrated geographically, so the loss of those jobs is more visible and consequential within a community when it happens. Natural gas jobs, on the other hand, are much more geographically dispersed and employment seems fitful. In 2017, there were nearly 26,000 natural gas jobs in the state but that employment had fallen to about 21,000 by 2021.^[vii] The realities of industrial employment in these two extractive industries makes it easier to reinforce beliefs that environmental protection championed by Democrats, not market forces, are to blame for job losses.

The irony about these perceptions of the state's fracking policy is that Pennsylvania's Act 13, the most consequential state legislation related to shale gas extraction, is largely deferential to industry preferences.^[viii] Pennsylvania has taken an approach that emphasizes resource

extraction and limits an emphasis on environmental policies.

Viewed over time, the consequences of the transition from coal to natural gas support economic and cultural explanations for the shifts in how working-class voters think about the two parties and were likely an essential catalyst of policy narratives that severed long-standing partisan attachments.

Notes

[i] Eliza Griswold. 2018. *Amity and Prosperity*. New York, NY. Picador, p. 6.

[ii] Alexander Gazmararian. 2025. Sources of Partisan Change: Evidence from the Shale Gas Shock in American Coal Country. *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 87 (2): 601 – 615.

[iii] Quoted in Stephen Medvic, Matthew Schousen, and Berwood Yost. 2023. *Are All Politics Nationalized? Evidence from the 2020 Campaigns in Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, p. 40, 192 – 194.

[iv] Do you believe the potential economic benefits of natural gas drilling outweigh the possible environmental damage that drilling might cause or do you think the potential environmental risks of drilling outweigh the potential economic benefits?

	Oct 2024	Jan 2020	Jan 2014	Aug 2011
Potential environmental risks outweigh the potential economic benefits	33%	49%	37%	35%
Economic benefits outweigh the possible environmental damage	51%	38%	40%	39%
Do not know	16%	13%	22%	26%

Note: The October 2024 question was asked a bit differently than it was asked in prior surveys: Now thinking about the entire state of Pennsylvania, do you think fracking has done more to help the economy or harm the environment?

[v] The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, Bureau of Oil & Gas Management's 2011 classification of county well drilling activity reporting was used to put the counties into one of three categories: Those with the most active drilling (Bradford, Greene, Lycoming, Sullivan, Susquehanna, Tioga, Washington, and Wyoming), those with active

wells, and those with no drilling activity. Figure 1 groups counties with any active wells into a single category while Table 1 provides the three levels. This [article](#) by the US Energy Information Administration provides a useful map.

[vi] Population change in Pennsylvania from 2000 to 2020 was 17.8 percent overall for all residents. See <https://www.fandmpoll.org/franklin-marshall-college-poll-population-and-voter-registration-changes-in-pa-since-2000/> and <https://www.fandmpoll.org/will-changes-in-state-population-since-2020-help-republicans/> for more details about the state's overall population growth and voter registration changes since 2000.

[vii] Employment data comes from the [2022 Pennsylvania Energy and Employment Report](#). A good description of employment changes in the state during the early period of shale development can be found in Jennifer Cruz, Peter W. Smith, and Sara Stanley, "The Marcellus Shale gas boom in Pennsylvania: employment and wage trends," *Monthly Labor Review*, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, February 2014, <https://doi.org/10.21916/mlr.2014.7>

[viii] Barry Rabe and Christopher Borick. 2013. Conventional Politics for Unconventional Drilling? Lessons from Pennsylvania's Early Move into Fracking Policy Development. *Review of Policy Research*. Vol 30 (3): 321 – 340.