

The Elections and New York's Environment

by Eric Goldstein

Friday, November 01, 2002 12:00 AM

While the 2002 elections are empowering anti-environmental leadership in the United States Senate, they also represent a high water mark for New York's environment, at least in terms of political rhetoric. All three major statewide officials -- Governor George E. Pataki, Comptroller Alan Hevesi and Attorney General Eliot Spitzer -- campaigned as friends of New York's natural resources and actively touted their support from environmental groups.

Of course, there will be tough battles ahead. But here in New York (and in contrast to Washington D.C.), our top elected officials have all demonstrated their interests in conservation and/or environmental health issues. And all three owe a debt to their environmental friends and supporters.

GOVERNOR GEORGE PATAKI

The governor, who has developed a reputation as an avid outdoorsman and strong conservationist, highlighted his environmental support, perhaps to a greater degree than any of his predecessors. He publicized his endorsements from the Sierra Club and the New York League of Conservation Voters. One of his high-visibility campaign ads included comments from the League of Conservation Voters' chairman, Paul Elson, who identified "cleaner air, cleaner water and more open space" as among the governor's environmental accomplishments.

H. Carl McCall, Pataki's opponent, also embraced environmental issues in the campaign. He criticized the governor for failure to advance refinancing of the State Superfund program (for clean-up of toxic waste sites) and for lack of progress on efforts to remediate and redevelop urban "brownfield" properties.

A thoughtful New York Times analysis of Governor Pataki's record on key issues, written by Richard Perez-Pena, credited the governor with keeping hundreds of thousands of acres of upstate lands protected, advancing urban parks, and helping to persuade the Bush Administration to order the clean-up of toxic PCBs from the Hudson River. But the assessment also noted that he reduced monitoring compliance and fines against polluters and sought to ease clean-up standards at toxic waste sites. The Times report concluded that "Mr. Pataki's oratory on environmental issues has exceeded his performance in all areas but conservation, partly because he has promised so much."

COMPTROLLER-ELECT ALAN HEVESI

The Elections and New York's Environment

by Eric Goldstein

Friday, November 01, 2002 12:00 AM

New York State Comptroller-elect Alan Hevesi also publicized his environmental support in his successful and hotly contested race against Assemblyman John Faso. As City Comptroller until last year, Hevesi proved himself to be a dedicated protector of the New York City water supply. Among other things, he skillfully defeated an ill-advised proposal to sell off the city's reservoirs and water assets for quick cash. And he played a crucial role in strengthening the 1997 city-state watershed agreement.

One ad that the Hevesi team ran frequently in the final weeks before Election Day highlighted his Sierra Club and New York League of Conservation Voters support. And on the campaign trail, Hevesi attacked his opponent for, among other things, his "votes against the environment."

A comparison prepared by the Albany-based group Environmental Advocates of the voting records of Hevesi and Faso covering the six year period (1988-1993) during which they both served in the State Assembly found that Hevesi's overall average score was 85 percent pro-environment, while Faso's was 69 percent. Not surprisingly, Faso did not focus on environmental issues in his losing effort.

ATTORNEY GENERAL ELIOT SPITZER

The third statewide candidate, Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, who had the easiest contest on Election Day, also featured his unassailable environmental track-record in his low-key campaign. During his first term in office, the Attorney General was a steadfast environmental advocate from the outset. After hiring the respected lawyer Peter Lehner (a former colleague of mine at the Natural Resources Defense Council) to head his Environmental Protection Bureau, Spitzer and his staff took on polluters big and small.

In campaign appearances, Spitzer frequently mentioned his lawsuits to curb air pollution from mid-west power plants, to force the clean-up of PCBs in the Hudson River and to rescue hundreds of New York City's endangered community gardens.

Spitzer's opponent, Judge Dora Irizarry, shared an interest in environmental issues, although her underfunded campaign was unable to get her message out.

OTHER CONTESTS

The prominence of environmental protection as a campaign issue extended beyond these three

The Elections and New York's Environment

by Eric Goldstein

Friday, November 01, 2002 12:00 AM

statewide contests. In several other races throughout the region, environmental themes played critical roles for winning candidates.

In what was one of the most incendiary Congressional campaigns in the region, Southampton College provost Tim Bishop squeaked by one term Congressman Felix Grucci in the contest for eastern Long Island's House seat. Bishop was helped over the top by an intensive ad campaign in the closing weeks that focused largely on Grucci's weak positions on toxic waste clean-up and other environmental issues.

And in the U.S. Senate race in New Jersey, former Senator Frank Lautenberg defeated businessman Doug Forrester. Lautenberg's campaign, and ads from the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, filled the airways with environmental messages (e.g. Forrester "wants taxpayers to foot the bill for cleaning up SUPERFUND toxic waste sites").

WHAT IT ALL MEANS

The increasingly visible use of the environment as a 2002 campaign theme in the New York region tells us something about the candidates who sponsored these messages and the voters who responded to them. First, it suggests that New York State's three statewide officials all have at least some track record on and commitment to improving environmental quality. Second, it reflects a growing recognition of the importance of environmental issues to New York voters. And third, it is evidence that New York has in fact become something of a "green state" -- a place where environmental health and natural resource protection have become cornerstone values that are widely shared by the electorate.

To be sure, there are many other issues on the minds of New Yorkers, none of the three state-wide office holders were elected primarily for their environmental accomplishments. In addition, it is unrealistic to expect that the governor, the comptroller and the attorney general will always (or even often) be able to act in concert on environmental issues. And the expressed views of these three officials on environmental issues do nothing to resolve the extraordinary problems that continue to plague the legislative process in Albany.

Nevertheless, New York's highest elected officials have all appealed to the voters to support them in their campaigns based in part upon the candidate's environmental interests and sympathies. It is now up to New York's voters to hold their elected officials accountable for insuring cleaner air, cleaner water and more open space.

The Elections and New York's Environment

by Eric Goldstein

Friday, November 01, 2002 12:00 AM

Eric Goldstein is co-director of the urban program at the Natural Resources Defense Council.