

The Election is Practically a Referendum on Arizona's Energy Future

By Erick O'Donnell

We don't usually like to dwell in great detail in this column on partisan fights, given their obvious tendency to divide and upset folks. But some political contests are just so singularly momentous, so closely tied to the success of solar power in our state, that we would be remiss if we were to let them pass by without comment.

The election in November is one of those contests. The Sierra Club, one of the nation's oldest organizations dedicated to resource preservation, was correct when it declared, in a recent headline on its website, that "[i]n Arizona, the future of renewable energy is on the ballot." We would like to share our thoughts with you on why that is.

While they have a lower profile than the race for governor, the contests for two open seats on the Arizona Corporation Commission could lead to more immediate and direct consequences for the state's energy transition. That's because this independent body regulates the state's power utilities, determining exactly how much these giant entities can charge households to install solar, how much to pay them for their surplus product, and how much energy they must eventually derive from solar and other renewable sources. Put simply, in the fight to make distributed solar power financially viable—and, hence, at all possible—the policies set by this body are decisive.

And while the commission should, ideally, do so impartially and with an exclusive focus on what's best for ratepayers, that's not how things have turned out in the past. The commission has impeded the growth of solar power in Arizona through policies clearly influenced by adverse interests, including APS, the state's largest energy company.

But don't take our word for it. In 2019, former commissioner Kris Mayes told the Phoenix New Times: "APS has spent the last eight years essentially undermining our democracy." The company has done so by running smear campaigns against pro-solar commissioners, as revealed by documents the company itself released, and pouring

millions of dollars into misleading political campaigns to unseat those commissioners.

And these tactics have yielded tangible victories in the fight against progress. The commission has allowed the power companies to pay homeowners a lower rate for their surplus solar energy than what the companies charge for their dirty, fossil-fuel-derived energy. Earlier this year, the commission voted three-to-two to scrap a serious statewide standard for renewable-energy production.

Incumbent commissioner Sandra Kennedy (a target of one of the above mentioned smear campaigns) and newcomer Lauren Kuby grasp the importance of solar power. Kuby is a sustainability scientist at ASU with a view of the big picture, stressing the connections between fossil fuels and the drought currently bearing down on our state. Kennedy has proven her willingness to fight for sane energy policies in the face of fierce resistance from regressive special interests.

Success for solar energy in Arizona would mean thousands of new jobs, energy security, and progress in the fight to head off the worst consequences of carbon-fueled climate change. But it won't just happen on its own. Good public policy makes a difference. In fact, a 2012 study by researchers at the National Renewable Energy Laboratory found that relatively strong pro-solar policies explain about 70 percent of the variation between states in installed solar capacity.

The upcoming election is practically a referendum on good energy policy. And the question is: do we Arizonans want to fully harness our most abundant natural resource, or do we want to continue letting fossil interests dictate how we power our homes and businesses?

Of course, these are just our own opinions. We know that how you mark your election ballot is between you and your own conscience, and we wouldn't presume to interfere. But if you're ready to cast your financial vote for solar power, then we're happy to help out. So call SunSolar Solutions today at 623-562-9009 to have a design prepared for your home free of charge.

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