

DEEP DIVE

Clean energy platforms win at the state level as 7 governor seats shift blue

Several Democratic candidates ran their campaigns on clean energy in stark contrast to their opponents, which observers say may have helped win them the election.

By Catherine Morehouse

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The midterm elections had many looking toward the U.S. Capitol as Republicans maintained Senate control and Democrats gained the House majority. But as federal regulatory rollbacks give states more control, gubernatorial races proved to have some of the more significant campaigns for energy policy.

"Gubernatorial offices are important to a number of energy programs, whether it's clean energy or utility policy or [renewable portfolio standards] or the way the state uses natural gas pipelines," Frank Maisano, an energy and environmental media specialist at the Electric Reliability Coordinating Council told Utility Dive.

"There's a lot of leeway that states have in their policies, as well as in the enforcement side, too, so they'll be able to have aggressive or more reasonable enforcement depending on who that governor is. So there's a lot of that at stake and part of [the Trump] administration's effort has been to give those states a little more leeway," Maisano said.

Seven governor's races flipped blue: Maine, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Kansas, New Mexico and Nevada. The Alaska

governor's seat was the only one to flip Republican, while Florida and Georgia are still pending final vote counts.

Although issues such as healthcare and immigration remained the top items for many candidates, observers say some of the gubernatorial candidates' strong stances on clean energy policy may have helped win them the election.

The right political play


"It was a great night for clean energy, it was a great night for candidates that had chosen to embrace clean energy," J.R. Tolbert, vice president of state policy at Advanced Energy Economy told Utility Dive. "And that's easy to see when you see that every candidate who ran on 100% clean, or 100% renewable energy was elected as chief executives in their state."

The most aggressive renewable energy mandate proposed was by Gov. elect Jared Polis of Colorado, who is pushing his state to commit to 100% renewable energy by 2040 — a goal that would surpass Hawaii and California's 100% mandate by five years.

Colorado regulators in August approved Xcel Energy's Clean Energy Plan, under which the utility will retire 660 MW of coal-fired generation 10 years ahead of schedule and replace it with renewable resources.

"Obviously this is a bold, ambitious goal," Jim Alexee, director of Colorado's Sierra Club told Utility Dive. "The coming weeks and months, and the first year or two, will really be a coalescence around what is the best way to get to 100%. How do we do it in a way that creates jobs across the state, and how do we do that in a way that is inclusive and equitable and addresses climate change?"

Other candidates who flipped their state's gubernatorial seats ran on renewable energy mandates as well, or brought other facets of the clean energy transition into their campaign.



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J.R. Tolbert

Vice President of State Policy, Advanced Energy Economy

In Michigan, clean water has become a focal point of the environmental debate, and "the synergies between water and energy infrastructure" have been central to that conversation, according to Ariana Gonzalez, an energy and policy analyst for Michigan at the Natural Resources Defense Council.

"Michigan and Nevada are among the starkest examples of where clean energy was the right play for a candidate," said Tolbert.

"Governor elect [Gretchen] Whitmer in Michigan was supportive of clean energy all along ... and her opponent Bill Schudy can best be described as the Scott Pruitt of the Midwest," he said. "He had filed lawsuit after lawsuit against the EPA, he had a thorn in the side on energy efficiency, on renewable energy, and there was a clear contrast and a clear opportunity for voters."

Nevada Gov. elect Steve Sisolak ran supporting the state's 100% clean energy mandate. Voters took a step in that direction Nov. 6, approving a ballot initiative to require that electric utilities get 50% of their generation from renewable resources by 2030. The measure must be approved again in 2020 before it's adopted into the state's constitution.


The current governor, Republican Brian Sandoval, had been supportive of many advanced energy measures, including expanding net metering and energy storage. However, Sisolak's opponent, Republican candidate Adam Laxalt, who served as attorney general under Sandoval, "had been very much an

opponent" of those efforts by the governor, according to Tolbert.

"That's another place that's a clear signal that being the advanced energy candidate was the right place to be," he said.

Maine's gubernatorial candidates were also divided on their energy platforms as they raced for an open seat with a legacy of tension toward the clean energy sector. The current Republican Gov. Paul LePage "consistently used the veto to override where the legislature [was] at and where the majority of Mainers [were] as well," said Tolbert, referring to the state's battle over net metering.

"Mainers want to control their own destiny and they want to be able to have control over their life, and when it comes to net metering policy, that is an opportunity for the consumer to take control of their energy future," he added.



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Jeremy Payne

Executive Director, Maine Renewable Energy Association

Net metering was not the only issue that caused a clash between clean energy advocates in Maine and LePage. The governor also placed a moratorium on wind development in July, and was "openly hostile to renewables," according to Jeremy Payne, executive director of the Maine Renewable Energy Association. Gov. elect Janet Mills defeated Republican Shawn Moody, indicating she would set the state on a path to 100% renewables by 2050.

"Frankly, just to have someone who's not openly hostile is a significant step in the right direction, and not only that, but to have somebody who has embraced renewables as a focal point

of economic growth and environmental sustainability," he said.

New Mexico Democratic Gov. elect Michelle Lujan Grisham ran in part on bringing the state to 50% renewable energy by 2030 and 80% by 2040.

She also campaigned to reduce methane emissions from oil and gas development and create clean energy jobs. The majority of the state is currently powered by coal, followed by natural gas and renewable energy, which makes up a little less than 7% of the state's electric power generation.

"She campaigned on — and on Tuesday received a resounding mandate for — really making New Mexico a clean energy leader again," said Jon Goldstein, director of energy regulatory & legislative affairs at the Environmental Defense Fund.

Her policies and the energy policies of other elected leaders in the state, including Xochitl Torres Small, who flipped the state's only remaining Republican House seat blue, indicate a shift back toward prioritizing clean energy, Goldstein said. "If you look up and down the ballot on Tuesday, you saw a strong message that New Mexico wants to see action on these [energy] issues."

Legislative cohesion

Several states' legislative bodies also shifted toward the Democratic majority, which some analysts say will smooth the transition toward clean energy.

"Colorado is a perfect example of a place where the legislature and the governor are going to be very well aligned," said Tolbert. "Over the past several years, electric vehicle policy has stalled in the legislature because of the Senate ... Now that that has shifted, I think there's real opportunity in Colorado for Governor Polis, who campaigned on an aggressive clean energy agenda, to work with a legislature that also campaigned on an aggressive clean energy agenda."

Maine also saw a "seismic shift" in its legislature toward a Democratic majority, according to Payne, which opens the doors to a number of significant opportunities for clean energy in the state.

In addition to net metering, eliminating the wind moratorium and the 100% renewable energy goal, Maine will likely join renewable procurement efforts happening among other northeastern states, such as Massachusetts and Connecticut, according to Payne. Gov. elect Mills will also be able to accomplish several significant steps off the bat, including appointing a new Public Utilities Commission (PUC) chair in March and a new Energy Director as soon as January.

Nevada's state legislature now has a Democratic majority as well, giving the state opportunity to turn the 50% renewable energy ballot initiative into law.

"There's no need for [the initiative] to go back on the ballot, yet again, and for us to see another \$50 to \$100 million spent," said Tolbert.

"There's lots of room for improvement in [Illinois'] portfolio and I think that utilities will be a willing participant in that process."

Frank Maisano

Energy and Environmental Media Specialist, Electric Reliability Coordinating Council

"This is an issue that, as we saw on election night, is something that has the support of the majority of Nevadans," said Kyle Roerink, communications director at Nevadans for a Clean Energy Future. Regardless of which party controls the state, Nevadans supported the ballot measure, he said, and ultimately state leadership should take that as a signal to push the measure

into law as quickly as possible.

"No one deserves to wait. Our economy can't afford it, our healthcare can't afford it ... If legislators are doing their jobs, I think they'll make sure that the policies and laws that they're advocating for reflect the results [of] Tuesday night."

Both Illinois' legislative chambers turned blue as well, sharing the victory with Governor elect J.B. Pritzker, who ran in part on doubling the state's clean energy mandate — to 50% by 2025 and 100% by 2050.

While Illinois currently generates just 6% of its power from renewable energy and nuclear power makes up almost half the state's power generation, the state has "lots of capability" to reach that goal, according to Maisano.

"There's lots of room for improvement in [Illinois'] portfolio and I think that utilities will be a willing participant in that process," he said, "Western Illinois has lots of opportunity for wind farms. It's a good state that has [a varied] generation mix."

Bipartisan solutions

Despite the Democratic pickups, energy advocates across the board say their priority is bipartisan cooperation.

"There's no sense in ramming through policy that only gets support from the Democrats, you want support from both sides of the aisle," said Payne.

"I think we can get that, but part of the problem with the LePage administration is they had sort of polluted the discourse on energy policy for the last number of years ... so [there is] the opportunity to re-engage the Republicans on some of these issues, and hop[e] they'll be open minded and willing to listen now that they don't have someone at the top of their ticket telling them how terrible renewable energy is," he said.

Republicans still hold the majority in both Wisconsin's and Kansas' state legislative bodies, though their governors are now Democrats. Advocates in both states say energy policy has transcended party lines in the past, and will likely continue to do so.

"This isn't Wisconsin inventing something, this is following the lead of corporate America, [which] is accessing low-cost renewable energy on long term contracts and putting solar on their buildings with good paybacks."

Tyler Huebner
Executive Director, Renew Wisconsin

"We've been working bipartisan in a good fashion for years now ... and I think it's starting to have a lot of success as the cost of renewables [has] come down so much," Tyler Huebner, executive director of Renew Wisconsin told Utility Dive. "This is really a market-driven opportunity with a lot of benefits for Wisconsin and we're starting to see support from a lot of different, not only political parties, but a lot of interest groups as well."

Wisconsin Democratic Gov. elect Tony Evers has a lot of opportunities to take advantage of, said Huebner. The state has not used its funding from the Volkswagen emissions cheating settlement, which could go toward EV infrastructure, something several states have already done. Wisconsin's heavy reliance on coal is one of the barriers toward its transition to renewables, but Huebner sees opportunity for clean energy investment in state and university buildings as well as throughout the rural sector.

"Fortune 500 companies across the country are doing this [transition toward renewables]," said Huebner. "This isn't Wisconsin inventing something, this is following the lead of corporate America, [which] is accessing low-cost renewable

energy on long term contracts and putting solar on their buildings with good paybacks. Those are all things that we can do now."

"Energy efficiency, distributed energy resources, renewables, it's really a bipartisan issue."

Dorothy Barnett

Executive Director, Climate and Energy Project

Clean energy leaders in Kansas also say that renewable energy has worked well across the aisle, though regulatory barriers have proven burdensome.

Wind has been a tremendous boon to the state, Dorothy Barnett, executive director of the Climate and Energy Project in Kansas, told Utility Dive, though broader customer choice on energy resources is lacking. Rooftop solar makes up just 0.01% of Kansas' peak load.

Further hindering solar growth, the state's corporation commission last year approved solar demand charges and rejected several energy efficiency initiatives, despite strong utility support for efficiency in the state, she said.

However, Democratic Gov. elect Laura Kelly has "a solid understanding of energy in Kansas" and her ability to appoint two new commissioners on the state's corporation commission will be a significant step toward making Kansas a clean energy leader, Barnett said.

"Energy efficiency, distributed energy resources, renewables, it's really a bipartisan issue," she said. "We've had folks from conservative Republicans to Democrats work together to think about Kansas's energy future."

Correction: An earlier version of this article misidentified Kansas'

