

"I'm An Energy Voter": What Does That Mean This Year?

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You've likely seen the ads declaring (and warning) "I'm an Energy Voter." They promote "ongoing and safe development of the nation's abundant energy resources." They decry "duplicative and outdated regulations and burdensome red tape"—"roadblocks that must be overcome in order to realize a prosperous energy future."¹

Single-issue voting is stimulated by single-issue advocacy. Both are common. For many advocates and voters, issue becomes identity. Each of us is "pro-this" or "anti-that."

In my field, the regulation of utility monopolies, the issue pie is getting sliced ever more finely. I started in the late 1970s, when there were only three interests: utilities, industrial customers, and residential customers. In electricity, we have added environmentalists (pro-nuclear and anti-nuclear), renewable-ists (incumbents and newcomers, solar, wind (off-shore and on-land), geothermal, hydro and biomass), energy efficiency advocates, electric vehicle charging station advocates, micro-gridders, storage investors, regional transmission organization supporters and their opponents. In natural gas, we have the producers, pipelines, marketers and local distribution companies. We have those who want retail competition and those who oppose it. Telecommunications has its own long list.

Issue voters make their issue "the issue," then vote that way. It's not ideal, because the government-citizen relationship is richer than any single issue. But it's reality. And when the issue debates are based on facts and logic; when people see that tradeoffs are unavoidable; when they cooperatively compare their ideal futures, then find their way from absolutes to compromises; and when they remember the needs of those left out, or kept out, of the conversation (especially the unborn, who benefit from our foresights and pay for our mistakes)—democracy can work.

But single-issue voting risks missing the big picture. Perhaps you've seen that 60-second film of five basketball players in a circle. You're told to count the number of times they pass the ball to each other. You count every pass, right up to 16. Then the film is replayed: You'd missed the gorilla that walked onto the court.²

There are bigger things than "voting for energy." Things like patience, tolerance, diversity and respect. Things like compassion for the war-tossed. Things like free speech and a free press—the principles that make democracy work so we can debate energy policy. Voting based on issue preference is a natural habit stemming from natural urges. But as with all habits and urges, if we care about others we exercise restraint. Because if we don't restrain our issue urges—if we vote only as an "energy voter" rather than as a citizen and a human—we degrade democracy. Adapting a famous poem:

First they came for the Mexicans and the Muslims, but I did not speak out—

Because I was neither Mexican nor Muslim.

Then they came to waterboard, but I did not speak out—
Because I was not among the tortured.

Then they made politician-criticizers libelers, but I did not speak out—
Because I don't criticize politicians.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.³

¹ You can see the ads (and take the "Energy Voter" pledge) at www.vote4energy.org.

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGQmdoK_ZfY

³ These three verses are a 2016 adaptation of the famous poem by Martin Niemöller (1892-1984), a Protestant Pastor imprisoned by the Nazis. The last line in the text is also his. His verses were these:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.