

Democrat Friel ousts 15-term incumbent state Rep. Hennessey

Evan Brandt – November 9, 2022 – The Mercury

In an election cycle that held several surprises, nationwide and statewide, one of them was the ousting of 15-term incumbent Republican Tim Hennessey from the Pennsylvania House of Representatives.

The second time was a charm for Democratic challenger Paul Friel, who said he believes several factors contributed to his victory. Those include things like the redistricting that moved the 26th District into areas with more Democratic voters; the statewide races for governor and senator and their impact on down-ballot races; as well as the Supreme Court decision that put the abortion issue into the hands of state legislators.

All of those issues drove turnout, particularly among younger voters, Friel said Wednesday. “I saw a lot of young people at the polls yesterday, more than I’m used to seeing.”

Those voters, Friel believes, were driven by concerns that carried a broader election theme: the potential loss of the right to an abortion and the potential for curtailment of voting access — both of which were major themes in the governor’s race between Josh Shapiro and Doug Mastriano, which Shapiro won easily.

“I think the changing of the situation with Roe v. Wade and how extreme some of the positions on social issues that the other side took drove some of the turnout,” Friel opined.

On the flip side, Friel said he believed that the Supreme Court decision regarding abortion “may have peaked over the summer and as some of the issues regarding inflation were being highlighted by the Republicans is when we saw some of the statewide races tightening, which made me more worried about my race.”

Attempts to reach Hennessey for comment through his campaign office Wednesday were unsuccessful.

While figures showing the age of voters in the 26th were not immediately available, figures showing the geographic impacts of the redistricting of the 26th District were.

In 2020, the 26th District included a small slice of Pottstown and otherwise clung to the county line in western Chester County from the Schuylkill River all the way down through Coatesville. After redistricting, the 26th District instead lost some of its southern areas and clung more to the river and now includes the Phoenixville School District, as well as the Owen J. Roberts School District.

And that change made a difference.

In 2020, Friel lost to Hennessey by 4,105 votes. Unofficial results showed Friel winning in 2022 by more than 3,300 votes and the areas in which his totals were highest were in Phoenixville, East Pikeland and East Vincent.

Hennessey, by contrast, won in the west in many of the townships which were part of the previous district map — West and East Nantmeal, Warwick, Elverson and East and South Coventry.

“There’s no question redistricting made this a more winnable seat for a Democrat,” Friel said. “The way the district was gerrymandered before made it hard for a Republican incumbent to lose.”

There were other surprises on election night as well. As in previous elections, Friel expected the vote count to take more time. “I went to bed and then I got a call at 10:30 with someone congratulating me and I was like ‘really? Already?’”

Also surprising many pundits are early results that make it likely Democrats won enough Pennsylvania House seats that they will have a majority there for the first time since 2006.

“Pennsylvania (Democrats) in general outperformed expectations,” said Friel. “I mean I had a good feeling knocking on doors when I went around and I thought we would pick up some seats, but I did not think we would flip the House.”

Despite shifting from a mindset of serving as a member of the House minority to the majority, Friel said his priorities remain the same — fairer funding for Pennsylvania public schools and “main street versus Wall Street. I think in both those places there is room for a bipartisan push there.”

As for the ever-present abortion question, Senate Bill 106 to amend the state Constitution to say there is no right to abortion is scheduled to go before Pennsylvania voters in 2023. If the Democrats take a majority of the state House, it appears unlikely it will be on the ballot next year.

“If held on a party-line vote my guess is we will not see that question on the ballot in 2023,” said Friel, who is also the president of the Owen J. Roberts School Board, a position he may not hold much longer.

“I recognize that Harrisburg will be a very different experience than being on the school board. It’s true lately partisan politics have crept into school boards on social issues,” he said. “It started with (Critical Race Theory) and then went into trans and gender issues. We were hearing it at school board meetings phrases also heard on the cable news channels, but they had no basis in fact as OJR has not changed any of its policies on those things for 10 or 15 years.”

But for the most part, he said, “I’ve now served on two school boards and I’ve been lucky enough to work with people who are primarily concerned about their kids and education and most of our votes have been 9-0 and when they aren’t, it’s usually not a partisan split. OJR is a very purple district.”

As he contemplates what lies ahead, Friel said he also plans to step down as the president of the Owen J. Roberts School Board. “I’m going to talk to the rest of the board members and the administration about the best time to it,” he said. His term expires in 2023, so it is likely his replacement will be appointed to serve out the last year of his term.