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TOP STORY

Polistina leads in Atlantic County state Senate race

Michelle Brunetti Post

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On June 8 2021, at the Bargaintown Fire Dept in Egg Harbor Township, State Senate GOP candidate Vince Poli arrived at the polls to cast his ballot. Polistina (center) after casting his ballot, standing with his family

MATTHEW STRABUK FOR THE PRESS

Michelle Brunetti Post

Republican Vince Polistina, of Egg Harbor Township, was leading conservative lawyer Seth Grossman after Tuesday's primary election to be the party's
Rnominee for state Senate in Legislative District 2.

"Tonight the voters of Atlantic County sent a clear message about the kind of Republican they want leading our ticket," said Polistina, the owner of an engineering firm. "Now, it's the time for our party to come together and defeat Vince Mazzeo and the increasingly radical Phil Murphy Democrats this November."

Assemblyman Vince Mazzeo, D-Atlantic, will be the Democrats' nominee for state Senate in the district. Mazzeo had no primary opponent.

With 91 of 121 voting districts reported about 10:30 p.m., Polistina had about 70% of the 6,144 Republican machine votes cast in LD2, according to the Atlantic County Clerk's Office. Polistina also had 904 votes by mail to 410 for Grossman, said Board of Elections Chair Lynn Caterson.

Countywide, 102 of 151 districts had reported by 10:30 p.m. and 13,974 machine votes from both parties had been counted.

Polistina had focused on economic growth while Grossman, a strong supporter of President Donald Trump, had made combating "woke mandates" a central part of his campaign.

"Although I failed to win this election, the campaign allowed me to make a lot more people aware of important issues that have been ignored for far too long," Grossman said late Tuesday. "It's important for Republicans to get behind (Republican gubernatorial nominee) Jack Ciattarelli and defeat Gov. Murphy in November."

Polistina, who was last in politics about a decade ago when he was an assemblyman, was endorsed by the Atlantic County Republican Committee, but Grossman has a conservative and libertarian following.

Of the 5,878 vote-by-mail ballots counted countywide, 1,903 were from Republicans and 3,975 from Democrats.

It was a low-turnout election, with far fewer voters than last year's record breaker of 49,394 primary ballots cast.

"Low turnout favors organization candidates," said John Froonjian, executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

"Party activists are people who vote every election. ... If there is low turnout, they are probably the only ones voting."

The Atlantic County Republican organization came through for Polistina, "who appears headed for a 2-1 victory over Seth Grossman," Froonjian said early Tuesday night.

The 2nd District covers most of Atlantic County. but some towns on the edge of the county, like Hammonton and Galloway Township, are part of neighboring districts.

The unofficial results do not include provisional ballots, vote-by-mail ballots dropped off in person or delivered late Tuesday at the Board of Elections, or vote-by-mail ballots postmarked by Election Day but delivered through Monday.

Results will not be final until later in the month, after all vote-by-mail and provisional ballots are counted.

Polistina will now face Mazzeo in the fall. They will vie for the seat vacated by state Sen. Chris Brown, R-Atlantic, who opted not to run for a third term.

Running for Assembly on a ticket with Mazzeo are Assemblyman John Armato, D-Atlantic, and Atlantic County Commissioner Caren Fitzpatrick, who ran unopposed Tuesday.

Running with Polistina will be Republican Assembly candidates Claire Swift, of Margate, and Don Guardian, of Atlantic City. Both ran unopposed in the primary.

Tuesday afternoon, Polistina voted at the firehouse on Tony Mink Pagano Drive in Egg Harbor Township, where he seemed to know everyone and voters indicated support.

Polistina even ran into his aunt on the way out of the polling place.

But not everyone there voted for him.

Dawn Lolla, 55, of Egg Harbor Township, said she voted for Grossman. On the back window of her car was a sticker that gave a pointed, and rather crude, message of dislike for Murphy.

“It was 100% the 2nd Amendment issue for me,” Lolla said, referring to gun rights. “I felt Seth Grossman was much stronger on that.”

She said it was a difficult decision, as many people she knew and respected were supporting Polistina.

Grossman voted Tuesday morning at the Richmond Avenue School in Atlantic City.

Grossman, who started the conservative group Liberty and Prosperity, said the divisions within the Republican Party represented by him and Polistina are “remarkable.”

“I’m in my bubble, and Mr. Polistina is in his bubble,” Grossman said of the base of support each has. “Mine is very enthusiastic. They are going to come out.”

In a virtual candidates forum held last month by the NAACP of Atlantic City, Polistina said his focus would be on economic development through diversifying the economy. Grossman, on the other hand, said his main interests were combating the rise of “woke mandates,” educating people about the greatness of America and encouraging self-reliance rather than reliance on government.

Both said they oppose the state takeover of Atlantic City. Grossman had sued to challenge the constitutionality of the payment-in-lieu of taxes plan to stabilize property tax payments for casinos. He dropped the suit due to the expense of it after Atlantic County dropped out after settling its case to get 13.5% of PILOT payments.

Polistina had refused to participate in a planned debate sponsored by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University and the League of Women Voters of Atlantic County, saying he did not participate in virtual debates.

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On A2

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Staff Writer

In my first job after college got paid to read the New York Times and summarize articles for an early online data base. First reporting job was with The Daily Record in Parsippany. I have also worked in nonprofits, and have been with The Press since 1990.