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Discontent bolsters West Virginia Senate hopeful

By Mike Wereschagin
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With an unpopular Democratic president, a depleted manufacturing base and a volatile electorate, West Virginia industrialist John Raese thinks his state might finally be coming around to him.

The president of Greer Industries Inc. won the Republican nomination for the special election to serve the last two years of the late Sen. Robert C. Byrd's term. It's his fourth statewide race, third Senate bid and second attempt to defeat a popular governor. He lost a U.S. Senate race to then-governor Jay Rockefeller in 1984. This time, it's Gov. Joe Manchin III, who won re-election in 2008 with 70 percent of the vote.

Manchin, a Fairmont Democrat, remains popular and last week won endorsements from the conservative-leaning U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Rifle Association. Yet the two most recent polls show Raese, 60, of Morgantown, is close.

"Manchin has a 60 percent approval rating, but (President) Obama has a 34 percent approval rating" in West Virginia, said Jim Broussard, a Lebanon Valley College political science professor.

That split — and its potential impact on the Manchin-Raese race — is reflected in the attitudes of many voters across the state.

"We need to put the brakes on Washington," said Democrat Mike Mazezka, 56, of Newell. "Sending another Democrat to Washington is not the answer at this moment."

Raese lists cap-and-trade legislation as the first thing he wants to stop. He calls it a government takeover of the energy sector, saying the carbon-control legislation is more about control than carbon.

Manchin opposes Obama's and Democratic leaders' proposals as well. He accused them, in a June interview with the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, of trying to "overregulate and overtax." The Manchin campaign did not return phone calls for comment on this story.

Raese has a personal stake in the energy debate.

"I burn a lot of coal in the state of West Virginia," he said.

He earned \$1.3 million last year as president of Greer Industries, which was started by his grandparents and produces asphalt, rock dust for mines, steel and more limestone than any other West Virginia company. His businesses include radio stations, a golf course and the Seneca Caverns tourist attraction, and are worth between \$32 million and \$76 million, according to his financial disclosure form.

He said he doesn't think he could continue to operate the coal-fired kilns at his Pendleton County limestone processing facility if carbon caps become law. Greer Industries employs about 1,200 people.

"We have to make a stand as business people in this country. We have to make a stand as capitalists, free-enterprisers in this country, that we've just had enough," Raese said.

If carbon dioxide is a pollutant, he said, "the largest polluter in the world today are oceans. Oceans today emit 185 billion tons of CO₂ through evaporation. If you take the entire amount accumulated and manufactured by man, you have six billion tons."

Stricter regulations will accelerate the nation's industrial decline, Raese said.

That message resonates with such West Virginians as Milan Ralich, 65, who retired after 38 years at the Weirton Steel plant. Ralich then "lost a chunk of my pension" during the company's bankruptcy proceedings.

"Now I work here part-time to make up the losses," he said from behind the counter at a Sherwin-Williams paint store in Weirton. He's leaning toward Raese.

"Government regulated and taxed a lot of industry out of this country," Raese said. "If we (created) a giant free-enterprise zone — a reduction in regulation, a reduction in tax — (then) China would have their hands full."

Raese would advocate paying for tax cuts by eliminating the federal departments of Education and Energy and the Internal Revenue Service, along with such other cuts as freezing federal workers' salaries for a year. In place of the IRS — whose agents he said would be of better use guarding the U.S.-Mexico border — he supports either a flat income tax or a national sales tax.

Raese's anti-tax, anti-spending rhetoric hasn't changed since his first Senate campaign in 1984, said GOP state delegate John Overington, who entered politics the same year as Raese. Yet voters, Overington said, are more willing to listen now.

He cited the rise of Tea Party activists who have bolstered such GOP Senate candidates as Delaware's Christine O'Donnell, Nevada's Sharon Angle and Kentucky's Rand Paul.

"A lot of RINOs" Republicans in name only "in our party, they're sweating right

now," Raese said. "True conservatives like me will say it's the greatest thing to ever happen to the Republican Party."

Last week, Manchin became the first Democratic Senate candidate to win the Chamber of Commerce's endorsement. The chamber cited the state's strong financial position and billions in business tax cuts during his six-year tenure. It's similar to praise he's received from groups such as the libertarian Cato Institute, which in 2008 gave Manchin its highest rating of any governor for his economic policies.

West Virginia's unemployment rate is 0.8 of a percentage point below the national average, its projected budget deficit is the second lowest nationally, and it was one of only two states whose bond rating was upgraded this year by Moody's Investors Service. It was the state's second consecutive credit-rating upgrade.

Manchin "is an invaluable leader who has a common-sense approach to job creation and getting America back on the road to recovery," Chamber vice president Lisa Rickard said.

Shortly after, Raese won the endorsement of FreedomWorks, a Washington-based group that rallies Tea Party activists behind Republican candidates.

"Now, I ask you, which (endorsement) would you rather have right now?" Raese said.

Raese's economic conservatism turns populist when it comes to entitlements. His top priority for Social Security is walling it off from other government spending.

"Whatever goes into Social Security has to remain in Social Security," he said. "Do I need Social Security? I don't think I do. If elected to the United States Senate, I'm going to be the first one to stand up and say I'd like to donate it back."

On foreign policy, he supports restoring funding for Reagan-era, laser-based missile defense as a bulwark against emerging nuclear powers such as North Korea and Iran. He said the war in Afghanistan is necessary but criticized Obama's decision to send in 30,000 more troops this year, rather than the 40,000 requested by former Gen. Stanley McChrystal.

"You can't half-fight a war," he said.

He opposes the rules of engagement that underpinned McChrystal's and, now, Gen. David Petraeus' counterinsurgency strategy. The strategy relies on minimizing civilian casualties in an effort to win over the populace.

"I don't think Audie Murphy had rules of engagement," Raese said, referring to the most decorated U.S. soldier of World War II. "What he did have was a flame-thrower and a .30-06. But he didn't go up and ask you, or look through a

set of binoculars to make sure who the enemy was. ...

"If we want to fight a politically correct war, we might be over there for the next 25 years."

Staff writer Salena Zito contributed to this report.



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