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Senate candidates, look to Pittsburgh

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Republican candidates for the Senate tend to dwell on the supposed threats from foreign competition. They don't say enough about the real opportunities being created for workers, companies, and families in the Keystone State.

Pittsburgh's transformation from a gritty "Steel City" to a center of technology, medicine, and higher education shows the path forward. Today the city is known less for steel and more for the "eds and meds" of Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh medical system. It has also become a hub of high-tech research on robotics and self-driving cars.

Candidates aspiring to represent the state in Congress should be talking about how to build on that success, not how to restore a mythical past through tariffs on steel imported from allies and neighbors. Tariffs are hurting important Pennsylvania industries such as gas and oil production.

One out of five jobs in Pennsylvania depend on trade with the rest of the world, both imports and exports, according to the Business Roundtable (BRT). In 2019, more than $41 billion in goods were exported from the state, with chemicals, computer and electronic products, primary metal manufactures, machinery, and transportation equipment leading the way. The top three export markets for Pennsylvania products are Canada, Mexico, and China.

Empowered by the internet and small-package delivery services, more and more Pennsylvania companies are cracking global markets. According to the U.S. Census, in 2020 there were 14,889 companies across the state that export — 88% of them small and medium-sized enterprises with fewer than 500 employees.

Global markets are also key for Pennsylvania farmers. In 2020, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, state farmers exported more than $2 billion worth of products, with dairy, soybeans, poultry, pork, and corn among the top commodities.

When foreigners are not buying Pennsylvania's exports, they're investing in the more than 1,100 foreign-owned affiliates operating in the state. According to the Global Business Alliance, foreign-owned companies employ 329,000 Pennsylvania workers, one-third of them in manufacturing. Major investors in the state include Akzo Nobel Coatings Inc. (Netherlands)

located in Reading; BAE Systems Inc. (United Kingdom) in West Manchester Township; and Domtar Paper Company (Canada) in DuBois and Johnsonburg.

Imports also benefit the people of Pennsylvania. Millions of low and middle-income families across the state can stretch their budgets further because of more affordable imports of food, clothing, footwear, furniture, and personal electronics.

Producers also benefit from imports and global supply chains. According to the BRT, "In 2018, 60% of Pennsylvania goods imports were raw materials, components and parts that are used by U.S. manufacturers to stay competitive."

When aspiring politicians do talk about trade, they tend to emphasize the negative. It's true that some industries have declined and factories have closed because of foreign competition, but the benefits to Pennsylvania as a whole have outweighed the transitory adjustments.

Pennsylvania's steel industry, for example, began its decline in the 1960s, long before the United States joined such trade deals as the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, or China entered the World Trade Organization in 2000. Much of the state has moved on to embrace the growing industries of the 21st century and the better paying and sustainable jobs they've created.

Pennsylvania's future is on the ballot in 2022. In the primaries later this month and the general election in November, candidates and voters alike should focus — not on bygone elections or industries — but on building a brighter future for the commonwealth in an increasingly high-tech and globally connected economy.

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