

Voter turnout again plunges to new low in New Jersey

Michael Symons, @MichaelSymons_ 12:02 a.m. EST December 15, 2014

Voter turnout in New Jersey this year was below 36 percent, easily the lowest on record for a U.S. Senate election. It's a years-long trend being seen in other states, as well.

(Photo: Staff photo Tanya Breen)

Story Highlights

- Not counting 2013's special election, the lowest turnout in a U.S. Senate race had been 43% in 1986.
- Turnout was lower than it has ever been in a year with U.S. House races, let alone a Senate race.
- The number of ballots cast, about 1.96 million, was the lowest in a U.S. Senate race since 1986.
- The number of ballots cast was the second lowest in a Senate race since 1954.



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TRENTON – Cory Booker gets to return to the U.S. Senate, but the big winners in New Jersey's election were apathy and indifference, in a landslide.

Official numbers compiled by the state Division of Elections show just 35.8 percent of registered voters cast ballots in last month's election, in which Booker officially won re-election by 13.5 percentage points.

That was one of the lowest turnouts in the United States and the lowest on record for a year a U.S. Senate race topped the New Jersey ballot. Compared with parliamentary elections worldwide, it would be worse than any country except Gambia, Haiti, Nigeria and Gabon.

"It's pretty abysmal. Something's got to be done," said Kerry Margaret Butch, executive director of the League of Women Voters of New Jersey.

New Jersey voters are on a streak of sorts, though not one to brag about.

Last year's gubernatorial race has the lowest percentage turnout on record for a governor's election and fewest ballots cast since 1985. The 2012 election had the lowest turnout on record for a presidential year, 67 percent. The 2010 election tied a record low for a year the House topped the ballot. Similarly, the smallest turnouts for elections when the state Senate or state Assembly were atop the ballot were also in the most recent year each got top billing.

"This is really a symptom of a sense that government is really just not working. Whether it's Washington or the Statehouse, the people really feel that there is absolutely no benefit to them going out and casting a vote," said Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute, who said the pattern is similar in other states. "It's: 'Why even bother expending the energy to waste my time voting for Tweedledee or Tweedledum because neither one of them's going to be able to do anything about the mess?'"

Murray said historical comparisons of registered voter turnout percentage are skewed because the number of registrants has been swelled twice by groups of people unlikely to regularly participate — the Motor Voter law of 1993 and the 2008 presidential primary between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. But it also reached a record low for a Senate race this year when compared to the total voting-age population, 28 percent.

New Jersey still has too many election days, even with most school elections now held in November, said John Weingart, associate director of Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics. It takes time to analyze candidates, and people are hard-pressed to spare the effort. More could be done to make new voters familiar with the process. But most of all, he said, people are convinced the result is inconsequential.

"People just don't think it matters. A good percentage of those who don't vote think that their life is not going to be different because Jeff Bell is in the Senate or Cory Booker is in the Senate," Weingart said. "Below president, or governor sometimes, it's hard to visualize or articulate the impact that one member of a legislative body is going to have."

Butch said some people don't vote because they feel powerless due to the amount of independent political money being poured into

campaigns.

"When things get too heightened, when rhetoric gets too crazy, it turns people away from the polls. The more money that gets spent on negative campaigning, that has the effect," Butch said.

"You have the Coke/Pepsi analogy," Weingart said. "If Coke and Pepsi's advertisements said, 'Don't drink cola because it rots your teeth, but if you're going to drink it, buy ours,' which is sort of what seems to go on in some campaigns, that is going to not motivate people to vote."

The state's gerrymandered congressional districts are partially to blame as well, says Ben Dworkin, director of the Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics at Rider University. People don't vote because they know who's going to win, he said.

New Jersey's congressional map is highly uncompetitive. The average margin of victory in the state's 12 House districts last month was 27 percentage points. Only one race was closer than 12 points — the 3rd District, where Republican Tom MacArthur defeated Democrat Aimee Belgard, 54 percent to 44 percent, to win an open seat spanning Burlington and Ocean counties.

"Among the top reasons people will vote is because they think there's something at stake and that their voice matters. After years of gerrymandered congressional districts, when you have an electorate of very motivated Republicans and rather unmotivated Democrats, this is what happens," Dworkin said.

Butch, from the League of Women Voters, says one possible cure for reversing the trend is an expansion of early voting. A proposal allowing that passed the Senate this month and is now before the Assembly, but a similar plan was vetoed last year by Gov. Chris Christie.

"We have some opportunities to give people more time, more access to the polls," Butch said. "It's a step in the right direction. I think it's a must, actually."

Civic education, cultural references to voting and an engagement in politics at home can also have positive influences on voting participation, Weingart said.

"When we see students at the Eagleton Institute who are interested in politics and ask where that interest came from, in well over half the cases it's their parents. It's remembering dinners when they were kids when people were talking about politics and remember going to the polls with their parents when they were little," he said. "But even if you can measure results, you're not going to see them for 10 or 15 years."

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