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College students persevered to vote

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Inquirer Staff Writers

College students around the region turned out in record numbers to vote, but probably few of them underwent the test of endurance that greeted students from Lincoln University in Chester County.

The average time in line at their off-campus precinct in Lower Oxford Township was five and a half hours, according to some students. Food and drink were brought in. Portable toilets were set up. When rain started, volunteers arrived with umbrellas and ponchos.

"It was a travesty," said Michele Vaughn, chairwoman of the Chester County Democratic Committee. "But the kids stayed in line. Their resolve was remarkable."

Student voters at campuses including Temple, Drexel, Pennsylvania State University and Rutgers New Brunswick showed similar resolve. They also waited in long lines but encountered fewer obstacles than the Lincoln students did.

Vaughn said the party was exploring legal options to force the Lower Oxford polling place to be moved.

But absent a court order, no change is likely anytime soon, said Terence Farrell, a Republican committeeman in the Chester County precinct, and the first African American elected to serve on the county Board of Commissioners.

In September, when presented with a petition from several residents, Farrell and fellow Republican Commissioner Carol Aichele voted against moving the precinct to the gym on the Lincoln University campus, where voters could wait indoors and where there is plenty of parking.

"The large turnout only happens one out of every eight elections, the presidential," he said. The next election is the spring 2009 primary. "Very few students will participate," he predicted.

Democratic Commissioner Kathy Cozzone, who supported moving the polls, said that no matter how many voters show up, the current polling place is unsafe. It's on a narrow road next to railroad tracks and has no place to park.

"I thought we should have moved that precinct for a number of reasons," she said.

According to unofficial returns 1,462 ballots were cast, representing about 52 percent of the precinct's registered voters. Most of them - 1,300 - were cast for President-elect Barack Obama and other Democratic

candidates.

Lincoln University president Ivory V. Nelson said that the university had agreed to the change but that the county commissioners had rejected it.

"We did what we thought was a civic duty in saying they could vote here," he said. "We want to congratulate our students for sticking it out. It was an important election."

Long lines and other problems also plagued polling places near Penn State, Drexel and Temple Universities.

The polling place at 12th and Susquehanna Avenues near Temple was among the last in Philadelphia to close Tuesday. It remained open until about 9:30 p.m. to accommodate all voters.

In Centre County, home of Penn State's main campus in State College, where overall turnout was about 69 percent, lines clogged when poll workers had to check the identification of newly registered students or couldn't find their names on the rolls.

"Clearly, they should have anticipated there was going to be enormous interest in young voters in participating in this election," said Barry Kauffman, president of Common Cause Pennsylvania, which works to modernize election laws.

Turnout among 18- to 25-year-olds often is low, said Jonathan David, director of voter services for the Philadelphia watchdog group Committee of Seventy. "But all of the campaigns and schools themselves had voter registrations drives. There was extra resource allocation in some places, but if you have a lot of people, that will create a line."

In New Jersey, Ingrid Reed, policy analyst at the Eagleton Institute of Politics, planned to review the number of provisional ballots issued to Rutgers-New Brunswick students this year and the procedure used.

"At Rutgers, we've had problems in the past, so we've developed a real working relationship with Middlesex County," she said. "But an awful lot of provisional ballots were used. We want to know how many there were and what the problems were."

Provisional ballots are issued to voters whose names are not listed on the rolls. They are checked for validity after Election Day.

Elsewhere in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, voting went fairly smoothly, watchdogs and election officials said. Minor and isolated glitches were resolved relatively quickly and voters were patient in long lines.

Susan Evans, spokeswoman for the New Jersey Department of State, credited aggressive poll-worker recruitment and county preparation for a large turnout. Zack Stalberg, president of the Committee of Seventy, complimented voter-education efforts.

Unofficial voter turnout in the eight-county area ranged from 62 percent in Camden County to 73 percent in Montgomery County and nearly 75 percent in Burlington County.

Statewide, New Jersey reported the highest number of votes ever cast in an election - 3,651,994, which will rise as more absentee and provisional ballots are counted this week. That's 67 percent of registered voters, a number also expected to rise as more votes are counted, Evans said.

Pennsylvania state tallies were incomplete yesterday.

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