

Voter turnout low across N.J. as elections lack big-ticket race

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By **Star-Ledger Staff**

SUMMIT — With less than one-third of the electorate expected to cast ballots today, Election Day 2011 is shaping up like a typical off-year, and once more casting the adage “all politics is local” up for debate.

John Weingart, the associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, said low turnout numbers reflect voters’ sense that even in a year when each of the Legislature’s 120 seats are up, those state contests lack the gravitas of a governor’s race, a U.S. senator’s contest or, of course, a presidential election.

“They’re seen more as local races,” Weingart said of the electoral battles for state Assembly or Senate.

Political scientists, he said, cite several factors for a decline in voter interest over the decades, including fewer civics classes and increased cynicism about the power of the ballot. Notwithstanding those reasons, investment in the political process might even start long before a person is tall enough to stand in a voting booth, he said.

“We ask students how they got interested in politics, and at least half say it’s because their parents were talking about it at the dinner table, for example, or took them with them when they went to vote,” he said.

That’s an electoral strategy Lisa Allen hopes she’s instilling.

Allen, 39, a newcomer to Summit, said she not only voted to better her hometown’s tomorrow but also her children’s. She hopes her 5- and 7-year-old will return to Summit one day to raise their family.

“I want to make sure that the candidates are interested in following through and they care about Summit,” she said today. “You want to make sure they’re doing right by the community -- making sure the storefronts are filled and out there fighting to keep taxes low.”



Aristide Economopoulos/The Star-Ledger

Summit mayoral candidate Mike Vernotico (I) votes in Summit. Vernotico is one of three candidates in a close race for mayor.

More than half of Summit's elected officials are up for election, mayoral

candidate Mike Vernotico said the four open seats should bring people out to vote.

"I just think it's important to vote," said Joe Amatucci, who never misses an election, after casting his vote at Franklin Elementary School. "You can't complain if you don't vote."

Lyle Brehm believes it was her civic duty as a citizen to cast a ballot and "express her views."

"I researched the individuals and voted for the ones whose beliefs are fairly consistent with my own," Brehm said.

In Mendham Township, home of Gov. Chris Christie, both polling places reported a light turnout.

By 1 p.m., a total of 459 voters in the township of 5,400 residents had cast ballots at the polling places located at the emergency services buildings in the Ralston section and in the Brookside section, where Christie cast his ballot this morning.

The campaign had little visibility in the heavily Republican township. Although Democrats were on the ballot in the races for freeholder, assembly and senate, a handful of signs for the Republican candidates for the Legislature were the only evidence that an election was coming up.

"It's been very slow," said Ralston poll worker Pat Rhodes.

There is, however, a distinct advantage to low turnout, at least for those who do decide to vote. Weingart, who lives in Stockton, said he was the 12th person to cast a ballot at his local polling place this morning.

"There were no lines," he said. "That's the bright side of the story."

By Richard Khavkine, Ben Horowitz and Victoria St. Martin / The Star-Ledger

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