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Teigen: Assessing voter turnout

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LET US PLEASE not refer to Tuesday's election as having had an especially low or especially high turnout. It is tempting to call turnout "low" in off-year elections, such as New Jersey's odd-numbered-year gubernatorial cycle, especially when compared to the remarkably high voting seen in last year's presidential election.

A better, apples-to-apples approach is to compare turnout to previous gubernatorial races.

About 2.3 million ballots were cast, and measuring turnout is essentially a fraction where one divides the ballots cast by the number of people who could have voted. So, how many voted in proportion to those who could have voted? It depends on how you count, and there are unfortunately more flawed ways of measuring New Jersey's turnout than there are accurate ways.

On the overly optimistic side is the typical way government reports state turnout: ballots cast as a proportion of registered voters. This strategy presents a rosy portrait of turnout because most registrants cast ballots.

Two stages

Yet, when one considers voting as a two-stage expression of citizen involvement, registration is simply the first part of the act and voting the second. Hence, political scientists eschew this overly optimistic statistic.

Yet, there is another common way to measure turnout that aims too low: using the number of ballots cast as a proportion of the voting-age population. There are about 6.6 million people who are 18 years old or above in New Jersey, but not all

can vote.

Research by political scientist Michael McDonald of George Mason University has demonstrated that there are two growing elements of the voting-age population that will inaccurately inflate the denominator of our fraction of interest.

Non-citizens

First, about 10.4 percent of those who live in New Jersey are not citizens, and therefore ineligible to vote. Second, the prison and parole population is also nontrivial, with more than 100,000 ineligible due to felon status (these numbers are estimates, based on 2008 data). Removing these people from the denominator, using a vote-eligible number instead of a voting-age number, creates a more accurate portrait of voting rates.

Utilizing this strategy, gubernatorial turnout in New Jersey has demonstrated steady voting at about four out of 10 eligible people casting ballots. In 2001, it was 39.8 percent; in 2005 it was 40.4 percent, and preliminary numbers for 2009 show about 39.9 percent turnout. Bear in mind that mail-in and provisional ballots are not all counted yet, so that number will rise slightly.

Is that enough? Many believe turnout is too low in the United States generally, and New Jersey specifically, and hope for higher levels of civic participation.

Lower turnout explained

Yet, there are institutional reasons to explain lower turnout in this context: onerous registration rules that some would like to reform, Election Day being held on a workday, and our nested governance system of federalism.

With a staggered election cycle, a New Jersey citizen must be cognizant of municipal politics and its leaders, county politics and freeholders and gubernatorial elections held off-cycle, and make repeated trips to the polling place. Throwing primaries into the mix, a New Jersey citizen might face a ballot twice a year, and that's a lot compared to how frequently elections are held in other democracies.

So, let us give ourselves a break: Maybe four out of 10 is a reasonable number in an off-year cycle.

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