

Low Voter Turnout

by Susan Reefer

Thursday, September 25, 2003 12:00 AM

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The primary elections for city offices held September 9, 2003, were barely noticed by most New Yorkers. Significant only in the lack of attention they garnered, the primaries were one of the lowest turnout elections in recent memory. Although there were a couple of close races, in the end, no incumbents were defeated.

Although low turnout is considered by many to be an example of what is wrong with the voting process, it doesn't always have to be a sign of foreboding. Sometimes low turnout is an indication that the electorate is basically pleased with the ways things are, and doesn't feel an overwhelming need to make major changes.

And history would back up that theory. Heavy voter turnout tends to produce change: getting rid of an incumbent or putting a different party into power or changing the entire make-up of a legislative body. Conversely, low voter turnout can be expected to send incumbents back for another term, or reward prohibitive front-runners, or shore up the dominant political party structure.

Not always, of course. But usually.

So low turnout can be a sign that voters are satisfied, or at least not extremely disgruntled. But low turnout can also be an indication of an electorate that feels disconnected from the political process. If voters feel their vote isn't going to matter, or isn't going to count, or isn't going to be counted, this will understandably turn them off the idea of making the effort to get to the polls. And if they feel there is no difference between the various candidates running, and no real choices available to them, and no potential for change pending the outcome of the election, they will be further alienated from the process.

Whatever the reason for low voter turnout, it is far from the ideal. The basis for the efficacy and legitimacy of a representative democracy is the concept of consensus: of everyone's opinions and choices having been equally weighed and the majority, or at least the plurality, emerging.

In party primaries, there is a marked correlation between the increasingly low turnout and the

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declining influence of political parties themselves. It would be difficult to mark the causal connection: whether the low turnout led to the lessened influence of political parties, or the reverse, the weakened party structure is the reason for the lower turnout.

In either case, political party primaries have always been an insider's game: so-called "family business." The party faithful, those few who are heavily involved in party organization and activities, are the ones who consistently turn out and vote. The up side is that decisions about who will represent the party on the general election ballot are made by those who are well-informed about who is running, who are aware of what those candidates represent, and who are actively seeking an advocate for their concerns.

The down side is that this tends to produce two major candidates (if that; in many districts only one party manages to field a candidate at all) who are the respective choices of a tiny percentage of the voting age population, at either end of the political spectrum.

And the low turnout in this year's primary is especially significant as New Yorkers prepare to vote on a ballot question in November. In the matter of city elections, should the party primary system be abolished, and replaced with a non-partisan election? If the law was changed, and New York did go to a non-partisan election, the party primary would be replaced by an open election, and any registered voter would be eligible to vote for his or her choice, regardless of party enrollment or affiliation. The top two vote getters would then move on to the run-off, which would replace the general election.

Advocates of the proposed system argue that ending party primaries will increase voter turnout. And this is one possibility. It is also significant to note, however, that in an adversarial system, candidates tend to focus on persuading active voters, not engaging new ones. Most campaigns are not interested in increasing voter turnout overall, only in turning out their own known supporters.

And in a general election, the work of Get Out the Vote, or GOTV, has historically been a function of the party. It would be difficult to predict who would take on the expensive and exhausting task of coaxing and transporting millions of people to the polls on election day once the party system was no longer in effect.

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Turnout on election day can be affected by any number of factors: the weather, traffic patterns, the overall political climate. And it is also significant that this year's party primary and the November general election are an exception to the regular election schedule. New York City had the same round of elections just two years ago, but instead of serving the normal four-year terms, city officials were elected to two-year terms in order to incorporate the latest census data.

But whatever factors may affect turnout, it remains, for now, largely predictable. Voting, while a choice, is also a behavior. Like many behaviors, it is not only purposeful, but habitual. And changing a habit, good or bad, is never easy.

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