



Lopsided Elections Prompt Voters to Skip Some Races, Hughes Center for Public Policy Finds

For Immediate Release; link to study at bottom of release

Tuesday, September 17, 2013

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Galloway Township, NJ - Voters skipping over candidates on the ballot for state Legislature – often because the race is not competitive enough to interest them – could change the outcomes of those elections, according to research published today by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy.

The results of three contested New Jersey state Assembly elections in 2011 could have been reversed by voters who went to the polls but did not vote in those races.

That trend was found in the 7th Legislative District in Burlington County, where Democrat Troy Singleton won an Assembly seat previously held by a Republican. The number of possible votes that were not cast in that race was nearly three times higher than the winner's margin of victory.

Voters who failed to vote for Assembly candidates also could have changed the outcomes in tight Assembly races in the 1st District (Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic) race won by former Assemblyman Matthew Milam and in the 38th District (Bergen, Passaic) race won by Assemblyman Timothy J. Eustace. To illustrate, 1,051 votes separated the Assembly winners and losers in the 1st District. However, voters who were actually in the booth could have cast another 3,200 possible votes in that race, but skipped it on their ballots. Those uncast votes were more than three times the amount that would have been necessary to change the outcome in the 1st.

“Election results in three tight Assembly races could have gone the other way based on people in the voting booth who did not cast votes,” said John Froomjian, Senior Research Associate for the Hughes Center at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, who conducted the research originally for a master's thesis.

Technically, the undervote could also have reversed Assembly race outcomes in the 11th District (Monmouth) and in the 2nd District (Atlantic). But the margins were so close that nearly every

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uncast vote would have had to go to the losing candidates to reverse the results.

While undervoting potentially affected several close races, it is often a sign of lack of voter interest. The research found that the more lopsided a victory margin is, the more likely it is that voters skipped marking their ballots in that race.

Froonjian examined the phenomenon of undervoting, also called ballot rolloff, in which voters participate in an election but for various reasons fail to vote in certain races.

Studies have shown that rolloff typically occurs in lower level races after voters make choices in contests at the top of the ballot. Froonjian noted that New Jersey's 2011 election made for a good case study because it was an off-year election, with Senate and Assembly races at the top of the ballot. Such an election brings out more experienced voters who are less likely to be confused by ballots.

Rolloff was found in every 2011 legislative election. The study found that more than 86,600 potential votes for Senate candidates went uncast statewide, and nearly 117,000 potential Assembly votes were not cast. In the Senate elections, 6.1 percent of voters failed to cast a vote in the race at the top of the ballot. Ballot rolloff averaged 8.3 percent of potential votes statewide in Assembly contests. In one quarter of Assembly districts statewide, 10 percent or more of possible votes were not cast.

Statistical analysis of N.J. Division of Elections vote results and Census Bureau data showed some correlation between undervoting and demographic factors such as median voter age, ethnicity and median household income. But the strongest correlation was found to be the competitiveness of the race. The greater the electoral margin of victory, the greater the number of uncast votes, the research found.

For example, in the heavily Democratic 31st District in Hudson County, Sen. Sandra Cunningham won by more than 60 percentage points. More than one in seven voters in that election did not cast a vote for senator.

Survey data collected by the Stockton Polling Institute generally confirm the findings of Froonjian's research, suggesting that undervoting is widespread and is related to characteristics of the election such as competitiveness.

The Polling Institute, which is run by the Hughes Center, found in a statewide poll of 811 likely voters in October 2012 that a significant number of voters skipped voting in certain elections. One in eight respondents (12.7 percent) said they did not vote in every race on the ballot in the last election, which for most would have been the 2011 legislative election.

Close to 50 percent of those who said they did not vote in every race cited factors specific to the election, such as not enough information available (14 percent), not interested in the race (10 percent), not liking the candidates (9 percent), and feeling their votes don't matter (5 percent), among other reasons.

All 120 seats of the state Legislature are up for election on Nov. 5.

"As we prepare to elect a new state Legislature this year, the fact that so many voters who go to the polls felt disaffected in 2011 should be cause for concern," Froonjian said.

Froonjian's study and tables may be found [Voters Who Abstain: Ballot Rolloff in a New Jersey Legislative Election.](#)

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