

N.J. voters 'maxed out' says expert on '09 votes

Tuesday, May 26, 2009

By Siobhan A. Counihan scounihan@sjnewsco.com

Voter registration numbers are still high in Gloucester County, despite the rolls being purged of outdated information in January, according to county officials.

Superintendent of Elections Stephanie Salvatore said there are 188,037 registered voters currently on the books in Gloucester County.

That number is slightly down from the 192,411 who were registered in November, since in January the county removed the names of voters who have moved to other counties or haven't voted in two consecutive federal elections, Salvatore said.

Salvatore said the county saw record numbers of people registering to vote last year, a result of the fever-pitch presidential elections.

"It was the biggest in history, probably," Salvatore said. "Last October alone, we had more in a one-month period than probably in three years combined. We saw an increase of almost 15,000 voters. It was insane. In the 14 years I've been here, I've never seen anything like it."

The state reached a record high of 5.3 million registered voters last year. That number is now 5.2 million, according to the state Division of Elections.

The registration frenzy has died off, Salvatore said, with very little interest surrounding the recent school board elections and upcoming primaries.

The fact that new voter registrations have practically evaporated doesn't surprise Ingrid Reed, director of the New Jersey Project of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

"The people who are interested are sort of maxed out at this point," she said. "How many people who pay attention are left who haven't registered? And with the downturn in the economy, even though Gloucester County is one of the fastest growing parts of the state, how many people moved in between last year and now? It's unrealistic that you'd get a whole lot of people registering for this election."

If there is any surge in registrations, Reed said, it will likely come in the fall in advance of the gubernatorial election.

"I would be very surprised to see any significant uptick in registration numbers now," she said. "And even in the fall, I don't think we'll see anywhere near the amount of interest or amount of volume that you had in 2008."

Even yet, Reed predicted that fewer people will come out to vote this fall.

"One of the things you worry about is all these people who signed up in 2008 for the presidential race don't know or care about what's going on in New Jersey," Reed said. "One of the things we don't know about this election is how much in the fall will people be angry or vote because they want to show somebody that they're paying attention. I just don't think we know enough yet about the whole context of the election."

So what does this mean for the upcoming primaries and the governor's race in the fall?

This time last year, there were 66,977 registered Democrats, 34,024 registered Republicans and 75,510 unaffiliated voters, along with a number of registered third-party candidates. Now, Salvatore said, there are 70,659 Democrats, 34,720 Republicans and 82,554 unaffiliated voters.

Republicans are hoping to attract unaffiliated voters or even Democrats who are unhappy with Gov. Jon S. Corzine's handling of the state's financial affairs, according to Gloucester County Republican Executive Committee Chairwoman Loran Oglesby.

"As far as the primary goes, we hope that the unaffiliated will support our endorsed Republican candidates for our county and switch to Republican," she said. "We have a very good opportunity there, especially with Chris Christie at the top of the ticket. We feel that Chris will bring people to support the Republican ticket, and hopefully bring unaffiliated voters to join our party."

Unaffiliated voters will be a major target for the Republican campaign on the local, county and state level, Oglesby said.

"We're hoping that people will show their dissatisfaction with Corzine and his policies," she said. "Chris Christie is our best opportunity to beat the governor in the fall."

Gloucester County Democratic Party Chairman Michael Angelini said that if the Republicans are hoping to make this fall's election a referendum on Corzine, they're setting themselves up for failure.

The economic tsunami that hit the state as well as the rest of the world wasn't Corzine's fault, Angelini said. He just happened to be in office at the time. And since then, Angelini said, Corzine has instituted some sound fiscal policies to attempt to blunt the impact of the financial crisis.

"The unfortunate part is [Corzine] happened to be there when all that stuff beyond his control hit," Angelini said. "I don't know that that's ultimately going to be where the voters will decide, but I'm sure that's what the Republicans will try to make it. He's very smart financially, but even the smartest people don't have all of the answers."

Statewide, there are nearly 1.8 million Democrats and more than 1 million Republicans. The Republican number is up by 21 percent from the last gubernatorial primary four years ago. Democratic registrations are 55 percent higher. The number of independents has shrunk.

Angelini predicted that unaffiliated voters would likely split 50-50 or 60-40. Since Democrats have such an edge in this state, it likely won't make much of a difference, even if there is a large drop in voters who actually go out to the polls, he said.

"If someone is taking the trouble to register for a particular political party, the odds are for the most part that they'll lean to that party and support the candidates put forth by that party," Angelini said. "That's not always the case, but overall, I like sitting where we're sitting rather than sitting where the other side's sitting."

However, Reed cautioned that Democrats shouldn't get too confident going into the elections this fall.

"Many more people participated in the primary [last year] and therefore have a party affiliation now on their records," she said.

Despite affiliating with a particular party, those voters could still go either way in deciding between Christie and Corzine, she observed.