

Dan Walters: Low primary voter turnout foretells November, could hurt Democrats

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By Dan Walters



Polling place at Engine House No. 5, a Fresno fire station on Fresno Street south of Shields Avenue, in the November 2010 election.

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Although election officials are still counting votes from the June 3 primary election and a few contests are still in doubt the lukewarm tenor of the Nov. 4 general election is evident, and that could be bad news for California's dominant Democrats.

The record-low voter turnout in the primary about 25 percent of registered voters is very likely to be reflected in November for many of the same reasons.

The outcome of the top-of-the-ticket contest between Gov. Jerry Brown and Republican challenger Neel Kashkari is virtually certain months in advance, there's no U.S. Senate contest, and there will be no barnburner ballot measures to motivate occasional voters.

The most heavily contested races will be at the legislative or congressional levels, but only a handful scarcely a dozen of the 153 districts involved are truly competitive.

Given this year's lackluster dynamics, the steady erosion of voter turnout that California has been experiencing, and the pattern of past non-presidential, non-senatorial elections in the state, we could see a

record-low general election turnout.

Four years ago, with high-octane duels between Brown and Republican rival Meg Whitman for governor and Sen. Barbara Boxer and Republican Carly Fiorina, voter turnout was 59.59 percent of registered voters.

It followed a well-established pattern of higher turnout when both the governorship and a Senate seat are at stake and lower when there's no Senate contest.

It was 56.19 percent with a Senate contest in 2006, 57.59 percent with a Senate contest in 1998, and 60.45 percent with a Senate contest in 1994, but just 50.57 percent in the last gubernatorial election without a Senate contest in 2002.

The lack of high-interest ballot measures, President Barack Obama's declining approval numbers and the historic losses in the party that controls the White House should, if anything, reinforce that pattern in 2014 hence an educated guess that this year's turnout should be about 50 percent, or perhaps even lower.

Roughly twice as many votes may be cast in November as the 4.4 million-plus that are being counted from June 3 perhaps 9 million. But unto itself, a higher number doesn't help Democrats if the turnout ratio is as low as it is likely to be.

It's a well-tested axiom that low turnout hurts Democrats, as the extremely low June 3 numbers demonstrated. Democratic candidates in the most competitive congressional and legislative districts generally trailed Republican foes by wide margins.

Whatever happens in a half-dozen or so competitive congressional districts will not likely affect control of the House. But outcomes of another half-dozen legislative contests will determine whether Democrats retain or lose their supermajority margins in the Capitol, and a low turnout would hurt their chances.

Call The Bees Dan Walters, (916) 321-1195. Back columns, www.sacbee.com/walters. Follow him on Twitter @WaltersBee.