

## Turnout for election could be worst ever in state

By John Wildermuth

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Photo: Tim Hussin / Special To The Chronicle

Image 1 of 5

The Rev. Amos Brown, center, leads members of the Third Baptist Church to S.F. City Hall to cast ballots on Sunday. Many African American churches take part in "Souls to the Polls" efforts to encourage early voting.

Image 2 of 5

Members of the Third Baptist Church sing hymns while Rev. Amos Brown, not pictured, votes at City Hall after their service in San Francisco, Calif. on Sunday, November 2, 2014. The "Souls to the Polls" march was in solidarity with those held in the southern states, fighting voting rights issues for people of color.

California is having an election Tuesday, but it might as well be a secret to many of the state's voters.

After a June primary in which a record low 25 percent of registered voters cast ballots, political analysts are predicting that Tuesday's turnout could be the worst ever for a general election.

The rock-bottom record was set in 2002, when only 50.5 percent of voters showed up to re-elect Democratic Gov. [Gray Davis](#) over Republican businessman [Bill Simon](#).

"We may well end up lower than that," said [Dan Newman](#), a spokesman for Gov. [Jerry Brown](#)'s campaign. "There's not a lot of chatter, energy or excitement out there."

Brown's low-key, low-visibility re-election bid deserves much of the blame. He won the primary with 54 percent of the vote over Republican Neel Kashkari, a little-known former Treasury official, and with all the polls pointing toward an easy victory Tuesday, the governor has spent little time and less money on getting his campaign message out.

By contrast, when Brown went all out to beat big-spending Republican Meg Whitman in the 2010 race, nearly 60 percent of voters cast ballots. In 2012, with President Obama seeking re-election, the turnout was 72 percent.

### **Low visibility**

The lack of a hard-fought, high-profile race at the top of the ticket can be bad news for candidates further down the ballot, regardless of party.

The campaigns at the top of the ticket "have the money to open and direct a conversation with voters, and if they don't do it, it doesn't get done," said [Tim Clark](#), a consultant for Republican Ashley Swearingin's campaign for state controller. "Voters looking for inspiration to vote (this November) are not going to show up."

Clark said his campaign is figuring on a turnout of about 43 percent and is gearing Swearingin's efforts toward the likeliest of voters and at the Central Valley, where the Fresno mayor is well-known.

"Trying to get the attention of voters during a ho-hum election year is tough," he said.

### **Different look**

Those likeliest voters look very different from the total population of California, said [Eric McGhee](#), a research fellow with the [Public Policy Institute of California](#).

"Habitual voters tend to be older, more rooted in the community and better educated," he said. "They also are whiter than the general population."

That means trouble for [Democrats](#), since the most likely voters tend to be more conservative and more Republican. Although Democrats hold a 43 to 23 percent registration edge over Republicans, statistics released by the Field Poll suggest the gap on election day will be only about nine percentage points.

Obama brought many Democrat-friendly young, ethnic and occasional voters to the polls in 2008 and 2012, but there's little on the ballot this year to lure those people out.

### **No buzz**

Even the bond measures and propositions on the ballot aren't the sort that create a buzz, despite the millions being spent on TV and radio ads.

"Props. 1 and 2 deal with important public policy, and so does (Proposition) 47," said Newman, referring, respectively, to a water-infrastructure bond, rainy-day reserve measure and an initiative to reclassify some felonies as misdemeanors. "But they aren't the type of things people talk about at the water cooler, if there even are water

coolers anymore.”

That doesn't mean turnout will be dismal everywhere in the state. In places where there are tight races, the voters will come out.

### **House toss-up**

In the suburbs of Sacramento, for example, it's impossible to open a mailbox without finding ads for the congressional race between Democratic incumbent Ami Bera and Republican Doug Ose, a contest that's considered a toss-up.

In the farming-oriented towns and cities of the Central Valley, candidates are hoping the Prop. 1 water bond will lure people to the polls.

“All we're left with are the efforts going on locality by locality,” Newman said. “But that doesn't make up for the rest of the state.”

Still, the effort to get out the vote continued over the final weekend before the election, with campaigns, political parties, unions and other groups making a final push.

In African American neighborhoods, for example, churches sponsored “Souls to the Polls” efforts, bringing their members out after Sunday services to walk or ride to the polls for early voting. Elsewhere, volunteers were knocking on doors.

Last week, Democrats brought one of their biggest guns, former President [Bill Clinton](#), to California to stump for the party's candidates. His message was about turnout.

Too much of today's divisive political rhetoric is designed “to make you voluntarily sit (the election) out,” he told a crowd of students at a UC Davis rally. “I'm for you, I'm pulling for you, we need you. Please be there Tuesday.”

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