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Utah's drop in voter turnout bucks national trend

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While America just hit a 40-year high in voter turnout, Utah slumped to the biggest drop in turnout among all the states compared to the last presidential election.

Just 53.8 percent of Utah's eligible voting-age population voted last month — down from an also-low 58.9 percent four years ago.

That drop of 5.1 percentage points was the worst among all states, according to data compiled by the United States Election Project at George Mason University.

"That's real disappointing, but somewhat understandable for the simple fact that Utah didn't have any competitive races," said Kirk Jowers, director of the Hinckley Institute of Politics at the University of Utah.

"The presidential race was not competitive here, although (Barack) Obama did relatively well. Gov. (Jon) Huntsman won by a record margin. Utah's members of Congress and the attorney general all won by large margins. So you didn't have the excitement of a close race," Jowers said.

He added that the states with the biggest increases in voter turnout were those that suddenly found themselves as new swing states in the presidential race "where they felt their votes mattered."

Such states included North Carolina — where voter turnout increased by 8 points, from 57.8 percent to 65.8 percent — and Virginia, where turnout was up by 7 points, from 60.6 percent to 67.6 percent.

Nationally, 61.6 percent of America's voting-age population voted this year — the highest since 1968.

The states with the highest turnout were Minnesota, 77.8 percent; Wisconsin, 72.5 percent; Maine, 71.1 percent; and New Hampshire, 71 percent.

Utah had the fourth-lowest rate among the states. The only states where it was lower were West Virginia and Hawaii, both at 50.6 percent, and Arkansas, 53.4 percent.

Jowers said that contributing to low turnout in Utah likely was "a lack of passion for Utah Republicans to vote for (GOP nominee John) McCain or against Obama. In 2004 and 2000, there was a real dislike among them for the Democratic nominees. This time, people did not hate Obama," he said.

Jowers said Utah likely would have done much better if Mitt Romney — a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and former head of the 2002 Olympics — had been on the ballot.

"If Romney had been on the ballot, Utah — I would have to imagine — would have done much better than it did," he said. "Absent Romney, I don't think McCain did much worse than any other Republican candidate would have."

Jowers noted that lousy turnouts are not new in Utah, which had the nation's worst voter turnout in the 2006 non-presidential elections. That comes despite all of the money spent on races here, and even pleas from churches from the pulpit for members to vote.

Reasons for that besides lack of competitiveness in races may include, he said, the fact that Utah has the youngest population in the nation — and young people tend to vote less.

Jowers also said reform of campaign finance and ethics rules in Utah might help to reverse low turnouts.

For example, he said state laws that allow candidates to take as much as they like from unions, corporations and special interests puts no pressure on them to seek low-dollar amounts from voters. "And the most likely people to vote are those who have donated in any amount," Jowers said.

Utah's lax ethics laws also have led to many news stories about special-interest gifts for lawmakers, and the influence of groups with big money. "If you have a negative feeling toward government and government officials, you are less likely to take the time to get engaged and involved in politics," he said.

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