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Utah voter turnout withers

Elections » Civic apathy empowers special interests.

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When the Utah State Senate shot down Judge Robert Hilder's nomination to the Utah Appeals Court last month, quite a few Utahns expressed surprise.

They were shocked at the clout of gun-rights advocates who had targeted Hilder because of his ruling upholding a University of Utah campus gun ban.

But close observers of Utah politics had expected the outcome.

The power of relatively small, but well-organized interest groups has steadily grown in recent years, helped by the general public's declining civic engagement. Exhibit A: the drastic drop in statewide voter turnout over the past five decades.

In the early 1960s, Utah had one of the highest voter turnouts among eligible adults in the nation, hitting nearly 80 percent. But that number began dwindling in the 70s and kept dropping through this year, when it hit 53.8 percent -- making Utah's one of the five lowest turnouts in the country.

"It's a troubling trend," said Kirk Jowers, director of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics. "Nothing excuses people from abdicating the most basic responsibility of their citizenship."

Power shifts

When large numbers of people check out of politics, they hand over decision-making power to those who are engaged, often because of their devotion to a single issue.

"Having a smaller voter turnout cedes ground to those who care the most," says Kelly Patterson, director of Brigham Young University's Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy. "And their opinions are indeed more important than those who care less because they're who contact their representatives and who vote and who make campaign contributions."

Utah's modern political history really began to take shape in the 1960s, when both the Republican and Democratic parties had strong followings in the state. But when national politics began centering on divisive moral issues, such as abortion, many Utahns took a hard right and have never looked back.

"The state has gone from a competitive two-party state to a noncompetitive one-party state, and that has all kinds of implications for voter turnout," Patterson said. "When you have two robust parties, you can recruit better candidates, fund them better, heighten interest and mobilize voters, all of which can increase rates of political participation."

Without two parties encouraging voters to get to the polls, fewer people show up. And always seeing one party win has a psychological effect, too, he said.

"Potential voters just don't seem to be invested emotionally. There's nothing about the race they find interesting," Patterson said.

There's also a generational difference that affects turnout.

High voting rates in the '60s and '70s made sense as baby boomers and World War II generations were generally civically involved, Patterson said. But in the mid-'80s, when Generation X began coming of voting age, numbers began dropping off in the state and nationwide.

Utah's demographics also work against voter turnout, as Utah is a young state and younger people tend to change residences more often and don't vote as frequently as older voters.

Patterson says one-party control usually begins to dissolve when those in power begin to ignore the public will, such as happened with the enactment of a private-school voucher law that was soundly defeated last year in a referendum.

"The trick here is that when one party does overreach, and the population shows some kind of fatigue, is there an opposition party in place to take advantage of it?" Patterson asked rhetorically.

What's most concerning to Patterson is that people form voting behaviors early in life, and if they aren't voting now, they won't vote in the future, even if there are candidates who are more in line with their political leanings.

"Psychologically and emotionally, the person who hasn't voted has told him or herself that it didn't matter, that he or she doesn't see the utility anymore."

Re-engaging

Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. has announced the formation of a commission that will look at re-engaging Utahns in the democratic process.

Jowers, of the U.'s Hinckley Institute, will head the effort. The plan is to come up with recommendations to reform ethics, campaign finance, lobbying, redistricting and voting.

"This new commission is the governor being very forward-looking but realistic about a demonstrable problem in our state: We are not voting as much as we used to and we are also continually losing ground on how we stand up to other states," Jowers said. One of the first steps may be acknowledging there's a problem. The Utah Lieutenant Governor's Office, which oversees state elections, keeps track of voter turnout only as a percentage of registered voters.

Using that criteria produces a much higher turnout percentage than using eligible voters. In this year's election, for instance, the turnout was reported as 67.8 percent. That was a far cry from the 53.8 percent turnout of eligible voters. Pamela Perlich, senior research economist at the U.'s Bureau of Economic and Business Research, sees hope for engaging the next generation of voters and restoring a political balance in the state.

She points to President-elect Barack Obama winning in Salt Lake County, an area of the state she says best demographically reflects the rest of the nation. It was voters who were either young, ethnic or highly educated who gave Obama his county and nationwide win.

"I'm calling it the Obama wave because this group nationally and in Salt Lake County voted for Obama, and now they're locked in as Democrats," she said. "It's the gift that just keeps giving to Democrats because there's a growing number of very young children who are racially, ethnically and culturally diverse in Salt Lake County."

From 2005 to 2050, immigrants and their children and grandchildren will account for 80 percent of national population growth, she reports. Utah will see minorities making up about 40 to 60 percent of its growth during that same time.

"In Salt Lake County right now, there are 117 languages spoken in students' homes," Perlich said. "The parents right now may not be eligible to vote, but their children and their children's children will. "

Those hoping for a resurgence of civic engagement say the key will be whether these upcoming generations of eligible voters actually vote.

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