

THE BIG TURNOFF

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The highest number of Long Island voters in at least 15 years sat on their hands Election Day, as participation in the electoral process continued to tumble.

The Long Island turnout reflects a trend of declining voter participation in off-year elections since the 1970s when county elections generally drew 30 percent of voters, said Lawrence Levy, executive dean of Hofstra University's National Center for Suburban Studies.

Levy and other experts say the factors driving that decline include fewer competitive races because of political maneuverings and growing cynicism among voters over corruption scandals and partisan gridlock in Washington, D.C.

"Democracy fails when an election is held and no one seems to care," said Gerald Benjamin, a political scientist at the State University of New York at New Paltz.

Suffolk turnout this year was at 19.17 percent, half of what it was 20 years ago, according to Suffolk Board of Election records.

In Nassau, turnout was 20.7 percent. Both counties had several thousand absentee ballots still to count.

Turnout is generally lower in off-year elections when there are no high-profile federal or state races to draw voters, and that was the case this year. In the most high-profile race on Long Island, acting District Attorney Madeline Singas beat Hempstead Supervisor Kate Murray.

Given the resources spent - almost \$4 million total by both parties - Nassau Democratic chairman Jay Jacobs said turnout was "disappointing."

"What we've seen is turnout has been diminishing every cycle," he said.

Levy said one reason is that there are "fewer and fewer competitive races because of gerrymandering and other factors," which fuels the notion that their vote doesn't matter.

Many of the races in both counties this year were blowouts. In 12 of 18 Suffolk legislative races, candidates won by 20 percentage points or more. In Nassau, 17 of 19 legislative races were won by 20 percentage points.

Daniel Altschuler, an organizer of the advocacy group Make the Road New York, said the group knocked on 10,000 doors in a nonpartisan get-out-the-vote effort. But with partisan redistricting tilting many races, "it makes it harder to convince people that their votes could make the difference when they know that the election will be a landslide."