



What happens if you hold an election and no one shows up?

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Football games, hunting and fishing, the sunny weather, it all seemed to attract more interest than Louisiana's latest statewide election. Or maybe voters didn't need an incentive to skip the polls because they simply didn't care about the campaigns.

Either way, it's a significant commentary that in the aftermath of back-to-back blows from the most devastating hurricanes in Louisiana's history, the bulk of the state's voters didn't think casting a ballot really mattered.

"Nothing has really engaged people," said Barry Erwin, head of the nonpartisan Council for a Better Louisiana.

The abysmal turnout appears likely to be the lowest for a statewide ballot in at least a decade, according to the secretary of state's office.

Though final figures won't be available for several days, elections officials believe fewer of Louisiana's 2.9 million registered voters showed up to the Sept. 30 election than in a December 2004 congressional runoff, when 23.5 percent of voters cast ballots.

Besides a slew of constitutional amendments, all voters faced races for secretary of state and insurance commissioner.

Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council, a nonpartisan think tank, said he was disappointed with the turnout and had expected that more people might be paying attention to election matters since the hurricanes.

"But apparently people were not terribly excited about the secretary of state's race, the insurance commissioner's race or any of these 13 amendments. Or, there were just too many things going on," Brandt said.

Local races actually helped boost turnout in some areas and kept the numbers from being even lower statewide.

"If they hadn't had a competitive mayor's race in Shreveport and in Alexandria, it would have been worse," said Jim Nickel, former executive director of the Louisiana Democratic Party.

The secretary of state's race didn't generate much interest with candidates struggling to find an audience and get name recognition outside of their hometowns. Ultimately, two state senators - Republican Jay Dardenne and Democrat Francis Heitmeier - made it to the runoff to battle for the job.

Meanwhile, the insurance commissioner's race got so nasty that it turned many people off entirely and generated a significant number of votes for a Libertarian who did little to no campaigning statewide.

The main candidates, current Insurance Commissioner Jim Donelon and state Sen. James David Cain, both Republicans, spent more time mudslinging than talking about insurance issues that face homeowners and renters around Louisiana since hurricanes Katrina and Rita. By the narrowest of margins, Donelon held onto his job with just over a 50 percent majority.

Democrats appeared to show up in fewer percentages than Republicans to cast ballots.

Nickel tried to find the silver lining, saying the election gave Democrats a "roadmap" for the next two years of elections, when the state's governor and U.S. senator will be chosen. That remains to be seen as Republicans in the state have continued to seem better able to energize their core voters in the past few elections.

Analysts think the state's next election, on Nov. 7, won't necessarily have better attendance - maybe just shifted balloting to areas with heated races.

The election not only includes the runoff for secretary of state but also the congressional races in Louisiana. Two are considered actual contests: the races for the 3rd Congressional District seat currently held by U.S. Rep. Charlie Melancon, D-Napoleonville, and the 2nd Congressional District seat held by U.S. Rep. William Jefferson, D-New Orleans.

The New Orleans area had dismal turnout in the September election, but a federal investigation into bribery allegations has clouded Jefferson's political future and brought in a dozen challengers against him. Jefferson has not been indicted and has denied any wrongdoing.

The five remaining U.S. House seats for Louisiana aren't really contested in a significant way, so it's unclear if people will feel a need to show up if they know their incumbent House member is a shoo-in.

Add in the fact the November election is on a Tuesday, and Brandt said he's not expecting a large surge in voter turnout. "We haven't had great success on Tuesday elections," he said.

To really improve voter turnout in Louisiana, Southern University political scientist Frank Ransburg said the state needs to change the way it holds an election: namely, shrinking the number of elections voters face each year.

"We hold too many elections in Louisiana, and the more elections we have, the more turnout declines," Ransburg said.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Melinda Deslatte covers the state Capitol for The Associated Press.