

Has a More Independent Electorate Brought Lower Turnout?

Monday, February 3, 2014 – 10:09 am



BY JEFF BRINDLE

There is always a subplot to a play. The subplot in last year's statewide election was the miserably low turnout.

While the main storyline involves the outsized influence of independent groups, the 39 percent turnout rate was the lowest in modern history.

In recent columns, I have been writing about the importance of political parties and how they are being outflanked by the increasing dominance of independent groups. These columns have called for the strengthening of political parties as one way of offsetting the influence of these unregulated and

anonymous groups.

But there is a second important reason for strengthening the parties. They may be one answer to reversing the woefully low voter turnout rate.

There is an inverse relationship between voter turnout and party identification. As the number of New Jersey voters identifying themselves as independent has increased, voter turnout has declined.

In the 1949 election for governor, the first following the adoption of the State's Modern Day Constitution, 76 percent of voters turned out to vote.

Since that time, the participation rate steadily declined, ending up at 39 percent in 2013.

Meanwhile, the number of independent voters was increasing. Though data is not available for the 1940's through the 1960's, 38 percent of New Jersey voters were unaffiliated in 1971 compared with 55 percent today.

From data available involving the national electorate, 19 percent of voters were independent in 1940 compared with 44 percent today.

With New Jersey historically a strong party state, it is a safe assumption that the state followed the same trend.

The decline in party identification and subsequent weakening of the party system certainly is not the only reason for decreased voter participation rates.

The changing political culture involving greater interest in single issue politics, suburbanization, cynicism due to Vietnam, Watergate, and the Clinton impeachment proceedings, and a less rooted society, all play a role in this drama.

But so does the decline in party strength.

Political parties are highly regulated and accountable. They are organically linked to the political and governmental processes. They link citizens to government and provide guidance for voting.

Not only do they contest elections but they organize government, provide continuity between elections, and hold officeholders accountable for their actions.

In today's celebrity politics, oversized influence of independent groups, and 24 hour media saturation, bringing back the parties is critical.

Numerous columns and ELEC analyses have highlighted the enhanced influence of outside groups compared with political parties.

Over \$40 million was spent by independent groups in this past gubernatorial and legislative election. This figure is three times that which was spent by the state parties and legislative leadership committees.

This certainly is a reason to strengthen the parties. But so too is the fact that enhancing party strength may also enhance voter turnout.

Jeff Brindle is the Executive Director of the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission. The opinions presented here are his own and not necessarily those of the Commission.