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TOP STORY

Ready, set, race! Election Day a test of local, county and federal priorities

Michelle Brunetti Post

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The October debate at Stockton University between Democrat Tim Alexander, left, and U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew, R-2nd, was viewed 3,000 times online. MATTHEW STRABUK, FOR THE PRESS

Michelle Brunetti Post

Voters will decide whether to give U.S. Rep Jeff Van Drew, R-2nd, a third term in office, the fate of partisan elections in Atlantic City and whether Democrats will keep the

Atlantic County commissioner seat that represents the resort, in Tuesday's general election.

Polls are open 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesday, with 28,000 poll workers making it all happen at about 3,200 polling locations across New Jersey, the office of the Secretary of State said Monday.

Results should be available a bit earlier this year, as a new state law allowed elections officials to open and prepare vote-by-mail ballots for machine counting during the days leading up to the election. That means they can be counted faster on Election Day.

As of Monday, 973,240 out of 6.5 million registered voters in New Jersey had requested vote-by-mail ballots, and 511,676 had been returned to their County Boards of Elections for counting.

Vote-by-mail ballots still can be returned up until 8 p.m. Tuesday at a secure ballot **dropbox** in the voter's county, via the mail if postmarked by 8 p.m., or in person at the County Board of Elections.

Turnout stayed steady in the second year of early voting by machine, which happened Oct. 29 to Nov. 6, with 213,919 voting early statewide, 6,426 in Atlantic County and 2,967 in Cape May County, elections officials said.

"There was about a 3% turnout, slightly down from 2021 which I personally think isn't too bad, given '21 was the gubernatorial race, with a normal higher turnout to begin with," said Atlantic County Superintendent of Elections Maureen Bugdon. "The Legislature, elections officials, everyone is hoping it will catch on and become more utilized by the electorate. We shall see in the coming years."

"I'm feeling good. I think it's going to be a historic day," Van Drew said on Monday afternoon.

"Before people go to vote they should go and fill their car with gas, go to the grocery store and buy groceries for the week, take a peek at their 401K and pay their bills," Van Drew said. "This is really to me and to many people about whether we are going to become more dependent on government than ever and more socialist in nature."

Democrat Tim Alexander said he would be working into the wee hours Monday night and Tuesday with his team, doing their best to get every last Democratic voter to participate.

"I feel good about the election, the pundits and I do not agree," Alexander said of predictions that Democrats will suffer because of President Joe Biden's low approval numbers.

"People are paying more at the gas pump and more for a can of soup, but that is going to pass, and women will still be without their constitutional rights that were stripped away when Roe was overturned," Alexander said of the U.S. Supreme Court ending the court's protection of abortion rights this summer.

John Froomjian, executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University, said this election could see record turnout once vote-by-mail and Election Day machine counts are added to early voting totals.

A recent Stockton poll found voter enthusiasm high this year, he said, and with the control of Congress at stake the trend towards focusing on national issues could push turnout to record levels.

The statewide turnout in 2018, which was another Congressional election, was pretty much a record at 54%, Froomjian said.

“It was higher than last year’s gubernatorial election, which was only 40%,” Froomjian said. “It shows you what gets the blood running. It’s not so much the State House as Congress.”

The October debate between Van Drew and Alexander sponsored by the Hughes Center and The Press of Atlantic City was viewed 3,000 times online, Froomjian said.

“We’ve put them out before on video and gotten 1,000 to 1,200 views. To have 3,000 people view an election debate is a sign there is really a lot of interest out there,” Froomjian said.

It’s difficult to predict how the vote will go in Atlantic City, Froomjian said, where a ballot question is asking if the city should switch to nonpartisan elections in May for local offices, rather than continue to hold party primaries in June and a general election in November.

Candidates would run as individuals with no indication of party affiliation if the ballot question passes.

Mayor Marty Small Sr. and five Democratic City Council members oppose the change, and the lone Republican on council and three Democratic council members are supporting the change.

Those supporting the change are also critics of Small.

“Normally when it’s a Republican vs. Democrat issue, I’d say Democrats clearly want to keep partisan elections and would prevail,” Froomjian said. “But this is Democrat vs. Democrat, which makes it tougher. I guess it’s a test of Marty Small’s organization, and whether they will get their people out to beat this back.”

In the last mayoral election, Small dominated, but two of the council people who are pushing for the change also did well in that election, Froomjian said.

The change would rob the city’s Democratic committee, which is dominated by Small supporters, of their power to choose which candidates to back in primary elections.

“I know Democrats up the ballot — there is no question they want it to stay the way it is. It’s a real plus for them,” Froonjian said of having well-known local candidates help Democratic candidates for county, state and federal office.

Atlantic County Democrats supported redistricting that changed the first district from safely Democratic, covering primarily Atlantic City and Pleasantville, to a more competitive one pairing Atlantic City with the Downbeach towns of Ventnor, Margate, Longport and a slice of Egg Harbor Township.

The redistricting also drastically changed the second district, which had been safely Republican, making it much more competitive by pairing Pleasantville with the Mainland communities of Northfield, Linwood and Somers Point and some of Egg Harbor Township.

Now incumbent Democratic Commissioner Ernest Coursey is facing a challenge by Republican Vern Macon, who heads of a fire suppression company. The results will show whether the Democratic gamble to have a better chance in the second will pay off, or rob them of one of just two seats they now hold on the nine-member county Board of Commissioners.

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