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Lesson from NJ's first mostly vote-by-mail primary election: There's work to do

MICHELLE BRUNETTI POST Staff Writer
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Martin Owens, of Mays Landing, deposits his ballot into a drop box Tuesday at the old courthouse downtown.

Matthew Strabuk / For The Press

The state's first mostly vote-by-mail primary election is over, but the counting continues, and officials and politicians are warning the state has a lot of work to do before it can handle a vote-by-mail presidential election.

“The statewide voter registration system was not ready,” said Cape May County Clerk Rita Fulginiti. “There were too many problems to rely on the data to send out ballots to all active voters.”

She is hoping for a mix of machine voting and mail-in voting in November.

Clerks’ offices around the state reported frequent crashing of the system, and incorrect information provided to them about voters. Clerks rely on the system to keep track of voter histories, addresses and other data needed to get proper ballots to voters.

Delays in getting results also are a concern, said Atlantic County Democratic Chairman Michael Suleiman.



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Atlantic City Mayor Small claims victory in Democratic primary

“We’ve got to figure out why it’s been so slow,” Suleiman said, adding he knows there were machine problems and perhaps a reluctance to spend the money on overtime needed.

Luckily, there were no Atlantic County races close enough to keep people waiting on pins and needles for results.

Democratic candidates in the 2nd Congressional District primary race conceded to presumptive winner Amy Kennedy shortly after the polls closed Tuesday night. Kennedy then immediately called for party unity to beat U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew, R-2nd, this fall.

In the Atlantic City mayoral race, with about 1,000 city votes counted by late Tuesday night, Mayor Marty Small Sr. was significantly ahead of his closest competitor Pamela Thomas-Fields, with about 60% of the vote to her 30%.

At that time, just under 10,000 of the 45,000 ballots received county-wide were counted.

During the last presidential primary election in the state, in 2016, just 39,213 votes were cast in Atlantic County, according to the state Division of Elections.

Small declared victory Wednesday, but Thomas-Fields has not conceded.





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Kennedy looks to unify Democrats against Van Drew after tough primary

With about 4,400 city votes counted by Friday afternoon, Small remained ahead with 64.4% of the vote to Thomas-Fields' 30.1%.

For Tuesday's election, one of the two scanners Atlantic County had for reading paper ballots broke down, officials have said. And there were problems with the remaining scanner reading some Atlantic County ballots. It read some folds as votes, resulting in 1,200 votes originally being thrown out as overvotes.

The problem was fixed Friday, Board of Elections Chair Lynn Caterson said, and the votes were retallied. The corrections did not change any outcomes, she said.

But fixing the problem slowed down the process. The board was only able to count about an additional 1,000 votes, going from about 28,000 counted at the end of Thursday, to just over 29,000 counted by Friday afternoon.

There are about 6,000 additional provisional votes still to count, Superintendent of Elections Maureen Bugdon has said. People who physically went to the polls Tuesday filled out paper provisional ballots.



Some voters insist on going to polls despite vote-by-mail election

By election night, Cape May County had received 18,568 mail-in ballots, and an estimated 2,500 provisional ballots were cast at the polls Tuesday, Fulginiti said.

In 2016, a total of 18,600 votes were cast in the primary in Cape May County.

County Boards of Elections are still receiving ballots and will until a week after the close of polls, as long as they are postmarked by Election Day.

John Froomjian, executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University, said the expansion of vote-by-mail did seem to increase participation.

“That many votes tells me that you saw a lot of non-typical primary voters,” Froomjian said. “Usually in primaries it’s just the party activists, people on the committees, in unions or organizations that endorse who are motivated to vote in a primary.”



Harrison concedes to Kennedy in a surprising twist to 2nd District Democratic primary

Many more casual primary voters participated this time, Froomjian said.

“They may have just wanted to express themselves,” he said. “There is a lot of passion, whether you are pro- or anti-(President Donald) Trump. A lot of frustration. A lot of voters are looking for any excuse to vent feelings or express themselves.”

The participation level in the November presidential election is likely to be high as well, he said.

“In many ways, this election is going to be a referendum on Donald Trump,” Froomjian said.

NJ Primary Results 2020 as of July 13

As of 4:30 p.m. on July 13, 31,625 of an estimated 45,000 ballots cast in the July 7 primary had been counted in Atlantic County. Atlantic County numbers are updated to July 13, but not other counties.

| County | Race | Candidate | Party | Votes |
|-------------------|--------------------|----------------------|-------|--------|
| Atlantic City | Mayor | Marty Small | D | 3,326 |
| Atlantic City | Mayor | Pamela Thomas-Fields | D | 1,627 |
| Atlantic City | Mayor | James Whitehead | D | 243 |
| Atlantic City | Mayor | Thomas Forkin | R | 403 |
| Atlantic County | Sheriff | Eric Scheffler | D | 15,985 |
| Atlantic County | Sheriff | Joseph O'Donoghue | R | 11,029 |
| Atlantic County | Surrogate | Stephen Dicht | D | 12,991 |
| Atlantic County | Surrogate | Levi Fox | D | 2,877 |
| Atlantic County | Surrogate | James Curcio | R | 11,174 |
| Atlantic County | Freeholder | Caren Fitzpatrick | D | 15,660 |
| Atlantic County | Freeholder | Celeste Fernandez | D | 15,701 |
| Atlantic County | Freeholder | John Risley Jr | R | 11,213 |
| Atlantic County | Freeholder | James Toto | R | 10,876 |
| Atlantic County | Freeholder D3 | Andrew Parker | R | 2,187 |
| Atlantic County | Freeholder D3 | Thelma Witherspoon | D | 3,184 |
| Barnegat Township | Township Committee | Alfonso Cirulli | R | 1,668 |
| Barnegat Township | Township Committee | Joseph Marte | R | 1,662 |
| Barnegat Township | Township Committee | Charles Cunliffe | D | 1,644 |

| County | Race | Candidate | Party | Votes |
|--------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------|--------------|
| Barnegat Township | Township Committee | Peggy Houle | D | 1,691 |
| Cape May County | Freeholder | Elizabeth Casey | D | 5,504 |
| Cape May County | Freeholder | Brendan Sciarra | D | 5,285 |
| Cape May County | Freeholder | Will Morey | R | 6,624 |
| Cape May County | Freeholder | Jeffrey Pierson | R | 6,535 |
| Lacey Township | Township Committee | Nicholas Juliano | R | 1,980 |
| Lacey Township | Township Committee | Bill Stemmler | D | 1,286 |
| Lakewood | Township Committee | Michael D'Elia | R | 4,805 |
| Lakewood | Township Committee | Hector Fuentes | R | 4,632 |
| Lakewood | Township Committee | Harold Herskowitz | R | 1,391 |
| Lakewood | Township Committee | Ray Coles | D | 2,110 |
| Lakewood | Township Committee | Mordy Gross | D | 1,977 |
| Little Egg Harbor | Township Committee | Ray Gormley | R | 1,632 |
| Little Egg Harbor | Township Committee | John Kehm | R | 1,603 |
| Little Egg Harbor | Township Committee | Gabriel Franco | D | 1,273 |
| Little Egg Harbor | Township Committee | Shaun Moran | D | 1,264 |
| Lower Township | Mayor | Christopher South | D | 1,323 |
| Lower Township | Mayor | Frank Sippel | R | 1,455 |
| Middle Township | Township Committee | Bob Jackson | D | 987 |
| Middle Township | Township Committee | Timothy Donohue | R | 1,091 |
| Ocean County | County Clerk | Scott Colabella | R | 39,146 |
| Ocean County | County Clerk | Kathy Russell | D | 31,413 |
| Ocean County | Freeholder | Joe Vicari | R | 38,731 |
| Ocean County | Freeholder | Helen Dela Cruz | D | 31,398 |
| Ocean Township | Township Committee | Ken Boulderstone | R | 1,019 |
| Ocean Township | Township Committee | Rita Kopacz | D | 567 |
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Cunningham says media bias 'muzzled' him in Democratic primary



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Harrison renews request for federal monitoring of primary in Atlantic County



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In my first job after college got paid to read the New York Times and summarize articles for an early online data base. First reporting job was with The Daily Record in Parsippany. I have also worked in nonprofits, and have been with The Press since 1990.