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Election 2019

## Atlantic City primary battle generates big mail-in numbers

MICHELLE BRUNETTI POST Staff Writer Jun 3, 2019



Tuesday's 2019 primary election is hotly contested in Atlantic City, where 22 candidates are vying to represent their parties in the November general election.

WALDY DIEZ / Staff Writer

This year's primary election in Atlantic County has already generated far more mail-in ballots than 2018's primary, which included contested primaries for U.S. Senate and Congressional seats.

That's in spite of few hotly contested primary races outside of those for Atlantic City's City Council.

Deputy Atlantic County Clerk Mike Sommers said the clerk's office mailed out 11,022 vote-by-mail ballots, and 3,128 had been returned to the office for voting by Friday afternoon.

Last year's primary generated a countywide total of 1,499 mail-in votes, according to county records. The vast majority (1,322) were on the Democratic side.

"Legislation has increased the vote-by-mails by at least 70%," said Sommers. "We expect them to come in Monday and Tuesday, right up to Thursday."

Since last year's general election, state law has required anyone who voted early or requested a mail-in ballot in 2016 to continue to get mail-in ballots sent to them, unless they opt out.

And mail-in ballots postmarked by election day must be accepted through end of day Thursday.

Atlantic City accounts for a third of those returned this year — about 1,000 — said Sommers.

There are 22 mostly Democrat candidates running for the right to run for six ward seats in the resort. The 4th Ward, where incumbent William "Speedy" Marsh is not running for re-election, has six Democrats and two Republicans vying for the primary win.

But overall participation in primary elections is extremely low compared to general elections, according to Ben Dworkin. He's the director of Rowan University's Institute for Politics and Civic Engagement.

"That is why organization matters, and therefore the party faithful who can rally the troops tend to win," said Dworkin. The ability to get out the vote can make all the difference, he said, and small numbers of people voting can have an outsized influence.

In 2018, 23,000 people voted in the June primary in Atlantic County, compared to 96,000 in the general election.

"Primaries are really a party function in New Jersey," said John Froomjian, interim executive director of Stockton University's William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy.

New Jersey has a closed primary, he said, meaning only those who are members of a party can vote.

“You can declare your party affiliation right up to the last minute,” Froomjian said, at the polling place. “Sometimes people become members of the party for life almost by default.”

Party affiliation is a public record, so people need to consider if they are comfortable with that party designation, Froomjian said.

The new rules on mail-in ballots created a lot of confusion in last November’s general election. People who had gotten mail-in ballots ignored them, and went to the polls to cast votes only to be told they were on the mail-in list so they couldn’t vote by machine.

Instead, they filled out provisional votes by hand, which were counted only after election workers made sure the voter hadn’t returned the mail-in ballot.

Use of the paper mail-in ballots, which hit a high of almost 12,000 of 96,000 votes cast in Atlantic County last November, has been increasing since the state allowed anyone to request one for any reason starting in 2005.

In 2017, the last time there was another big City Council primary in Atlantic City, a total of 1,166 mail-in votes were cast countywide — 944 in Atlantic City and almost all on the Democratic side.

In addition to Atlantic City, there are also contested local races in Mullica Township, Folsom and Buena Vista Township.

Atlantic County Superintendent of Elections Maureen Bugdon said there are **151 voting districts** in the county, each of which receives two voting machines. Her office is responsible for maintaining, checking and delivering the machines. The same number of machines go out for the primary as for general elections, she said.

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