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Correction Appended

W.Va.'s turnout down nearly 8 percent in historic election

BYLINE: Alison Knezevich, Staff writer

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THE NUMBERS

58.2%

Percentage of registered voters who cast
ballots in 2008

65.8%

Percentage of registered voters who cast
ballots in 2004

In a **historic election** where more Americans voted than ever before, fewer West Virginians voted Tuesday than in the presidential **election** of 2004, with **turnout** particularly low in some heavily Democratic counties.

Unofficial numbers show that West Virginia voter **turnout** dropped by nearly **8 percent** in Tuesday's race.

About 58.2 **percent** of voters went to the polls this fall, compared to 65.8 **percent** in the 2004 race, according to numbers provided by the Secretary of State's office.

"Voters apparently didn't feel the need to come out and weigh in on the many uncontested local races," said Deputy Secretary of State Sarah Bailey. "That may account for the lessened participation this year."

The numbers are unofficial and could go up slightly after provisional ballots are counted, she said.

As Democrat Barack Obama swept states across the country, Republican John McCain took the Mountain State by about 13 percentage points. The Arizona senator won West Virginia by nearly 93,000 votes, according to unofficial results.

The race was tight in Kanawha County, where 440 votes separated the two. It wasn't nearly as close in nearby Putnam County, where McCain took about 61 **percent** of the vote.

Overall, all but seven counties went to Obama. The Illinois senator's highest margins of victory came from Boone and McDowell counties.

Those two southern counties also rank among the counties with the lowest voting **turnout**.

"We've seen it for years, that while those southern coalfields enjoy the largest Democratic registration advantage, they also struggle with **turnout**," said Mike Plante, a Democratic political consultant.

Eight of West Virginia's 10 most heavily Democratic counties rank among the 10 lowest-**turnout** counties.

For example, in McDowell, 82 **percent** of voters are registered Democrats - making it the second-most Democratic county in the state.

In the 2004 and 2008 general **elections**, just more than 40 **percent** of voters there turned out. This year, they picked Obama, 54 **percent** to 45 **percent**.

Plante said the results discount some people's assumptions that rural voters wouldn't go for Obama.

"I think it does go to disprove some of the national media's oversimplification of West Virginia not being comfortable voting for an African-American," Plante said. "Clearly, McDowell is everything that fits outside the neat paradigm, which is that Obama does well with younger, urban voters."

Twelve **percent** of McDowell County residents are black, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, the highest rate in the state.

Non-competitive races for governor and the Senate also might have led to overall lower **turnout** this year, Plante said.

And West Virginia has one of the nation's smallest populations of minorities, who turned out in record numbers nationally this year, Plante said.

Age also likely played a role.

"There appeared to be a higher youth **turnout** nationally, and West Virginia's electorate is an older electorate," said Neil Berch, a political science professor at West Virginia University.

Both Berch and Plante said voters of both parties might have lacked enthusiasm for the presidential candidates.

"I think they didn't like either candidate, or they didn't like McCain enough to vote for him, and they weren't going to vote for Obama," Berch said.

He also noted that nationally, **turnout** was down among people who voted for President George W. Bush in 2004.

After years of being a reliably "blue" state, this **election** marks the third straight time where West Virginians have picked a Republican for president - a change some observers have attributed to voters' social views.

In 2004, Bush defeated Democrat John Kerry by almost exactly the same margin as McCain defeated Obama. That means West Virginia is moving toward the right, Berch said, because the nation favored Obama this year.

Plante called West Virginians "an amalgam of populist interest and conservative social values."

"But again, that one-size-fits-all statement doesn't neatly explain everything," he said, pointing to members of West Virginia's congressional delegation who support abortion rights.

With all the talk of race in the **election**, Plante said he didn't think it was the deciding factor in West Virginia.

"I don't attribute [Obama's] performance here or his loss here to any horrible racial undertones that would prevent us from voting for an African-American or another minority," he said. "How do you explain that [West Virginia] didn't vote for Al Gore or John Kerry? The answer is not as simple as we might like to make it."

Rather, he described West Virginians as "a little bit suspicious of outsiders."

"We have a long history of out-of-state industries coming here, extractive industries coming in, setting up shop ... and then disappearing on us," he said.

Staff writer Ken Ward Jr. contributed to this report.

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CORRECTION: A story in Thursday's Gazette misstated how many counties in West Virginia voted for President-elect Barack Obama. John McCain won in 48 counties, and Obama won in seven.

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