



Everything New Orleans

The Times-Picayune

Flood-ravaged neighborhoods may lose clout

Voter turnout in most of them plummets in mayoral primary

Tuesday, May 02, 2006

By Brian Thevenot
Staff writer

With voter turnout down in many flood-ravaged wards and up in relatively undamaged areas, residents of neighborhoods like the Lower 9th Ward and eastern New Orleans could see an erosion of political clout, according to a Brown University study released Monday.

As expected, Katrina's population displacement also depressed overall voter turnout and shifted the racial demographics of the electorate. But the shift in the voting power of different neighborhoods may have more impact in the city's new political landscape, where neighborhood issues reign over all others, said Brown sociologist John Logan.

"There was a dramatic shift in the relative importance of specific neighborhoods," the study concludes.

In general, voters from Gentilly, the Lower 9th Ward, Central City and most of eastern New Orleans voted in far fewer numbers than neighborhoods spared by the flood, such as the French Quarter and Uptown, which saw moderate increases in turnout. The same did not hold true for flood-ravaged Lakeview, where voters turned out in nearly the same numbers as they did in the 2002 mayoral election, Logan said, attributing the higher Lakeview turnout to active civic groups that succeeded in motivating a relatively affluent populace.

And it doesn't take an Ivy League sociologist to point out the basic rule of politics: Neighborhoods that deliver votes to candidates will be rewarded with more money, services and attention from leaders who need their votes to advance their political careers. The neighborhood dynamics are closely related to racial dynamics, of course, given that turnout lagged most in predominantly African-American precincts, Logan said.

In all, the 108,000 votes cast in the primary represent about 83 percent of the turnout in the 2002 mayor's election, Logan noted. Black voters accounted for about 57 percent of that total, a downward shift of 6 or 7 percentage points from a typical election. Logan characterized the change as substantial, if not unexpected.

"It's a very big change," he said. "If you look at most cities, across elections, this is the kind of number that always stays stable."

But geography trumps race in the political analysis, Logan said. With the question of the very existence of some flood-ravaged neighborhoods on the table, as well the level of rebuilding money and city services they will receive, diminished voter turnout in certain neighborhoods could have

major political consequences, Logan said.

"People have interests tied to specific territories. If you happen to be an African-American in the French Quarter, your vote doesn't have the same impact as an African-American in eastern New Orleans," Logan said. "The Lower 9th Ward and New Orleans East were very under-represented in the election. . . . I firmly believe that as decisions are made about allocating resources, that the resources will follow the votes. Politicians don't usually serve the city or the public as a whole; they have to be concerned about how they're going to maintain an electoral majority. "

In Gentilly, voter turnout ran about 78 percent of the level shown in the 2002 mayoral election. In eastern New Orleans, about 73 percent showed up. In the Lower 9th Ward, turnout fell more sharply, to 58 percent of 2002 levels.

None of this surprised Logan, given the inherent difficulty in getting election news and information and navigating the voting process from out of town or out of state. What he did not expect to find was the relatively high turnout in Lakeview, which took roughly equal flood damage to lower turnout neighborhoods, where voter participation fell only to 94 percent of its 2002 levels.

Also puzzling, Logan said, was that many high-and-dry neighborhoods only posted modest gains in voter turnout in what so many have called the most important election in the history of New Orleans.

In the Irish Channel, for instance, turnout increased slightly to about 110 percent of its 2002 levels, a typical level for a neighborhood that didn't flood. But by another measuring stick Logan used -- the 2004 presidential election -- far fewer voters turned out, about 65 percent.

"In the neighborhoods where people are probably back in their homes and living close to normal lives, I thought they'd be turning out like gangbusters," Logan said. "I thought they'd turn out like the last presidential race, given that this election was so much more important to their future than whether Kerry or Bush was elected."

.....

Brian Thevenot can be reached at bthevenot@timespicayune.com or at (504) 826-3482.

NEIGHBORHOOD POWER SHIFT

Voter turnout in flood-ravaged neighborhoods in many cases fell sharply in comparison with the 2002 mayoral election, while turnout in relatively undamaged neighborhoods increased moderately. One exception: Lakeview, where turnout approached pre-Katrina levels.

