

Abraham Went

St. Peter's Prep/Mrs. McElroy

Voting Rights

1/16/2024

### Beyond Democracy: Exploring Voter Participation in Hudson County, NJ

Voter participation is the keystone for any functioning democracy. Voting gives each citizen a voice in their government. Democracy is only as strong as the voters who cast their vote. In Hudson County, New Jersey, voter participation has been significantly below New Jersey state voter turnout.<sup>1</sup> A reason for this is that one party dominates local politics, which negatively affects voter participation.

The Hudson County Democratic Organization dominates the county. This dominance has led voters to not participate in local elections. The average voter turnout is 31.6%<sup>2</sup> over the last five general elections. This is significantly lower than the New Jersey average voter turnout of 41.4%<sup>3</sup> over the same period. In 2021, Democrats won every public office in Hudson County with no republican receiving more than 40% of any vote.<sup>4</sup> Two years later, Craig Guy was elected as the County Executive with 98.2% of the vote.<sup>5</sup> An explanation for this is the low voter turnout: 17.7% of registered voters cast their vote in 2023.<sup>6</sup> Hudson County's poor election participation is not found elsewhere in New Jersey. Monmouth County, NJ, which performs

---

<sup>1</sup> Election result data for the State of New Jersey is from the [NJ DOS | Elections Archive](#), and includes all election results, including voting turnout statistics, from 1925 and onwards. [NJ DOS | Elections Archive 2023-Official Results Voter Turnout](#). All data referenced below was accessed on January 15, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> All Hudson County, NJ, election result data is from the [Hudson County Clerk Election Archive](#), and includes all primary, municipal, and general election results.

<sup>3</sup>[2019 New Jersey voter turnout was 27 percent](#)

<sup>4</sup>[Hudson County General Election Results 2021](#)

<sup>5</sup>[Hudson County General Election Results 2023](#)

<sup>6</sup>[Hudson County General Election Results 2023](#)

slightly above the state average for voter turnout in general elections, averaged a 47.9% voter turnout for the past five years.<sup>7</sup> In the 2021 election for General Assembly in the 11th District of New Jersey, there were four candidates<sup>8</sup> that were separated by less than half of percent.<sup>9</sup> Monmouth County had multiple candidates running for office and this competition was reflected in the higher voter turnout. Voters want to vote for their preferred candidate, to ensure that their voice is heard, which increases voter turnout. Thus, voter turnout is important and is a strong indication that there is an important relationship between those who seek office and those who they represent: those who govern and the governed. However, if voter participation is not strong, as it is in Hudson County, uncontested elections can happen. Perhaps election participation is a function of the number of candidates: when there are multiple candidates, there is competition and that increases voter participation.

In Hudson County there are three different mayors who have occupied their office for approximately twenty years<sup>10</sup>. Many of these mayors benefitted from uncontested elections and

---

<sup>7</sup> All Monmouth County, NJ, election result data is from the [Monmouth County Clerk Election Archives](#), and includes all primary, municipal, and general election results.

<sup>8</sup> In General Assembly elections in New Jersey, one voter can vote for two candidates for the Assembly.

<sup>9</sup> [Monmouth County Clerk General Election Results 2021](#)

<sup>10</sup> The mayors of North Bergen, Union City, Weehawken are the three current mayors; however, the previous mayors of West New York and Kearny were in office for twenty years as well.

Sources:

Israel, Daniel. "Two Long-Time North Hudson Mayors Are Guaranteed Victory in the May 10 Election." *Hudson Reporter*, Newspaper Media Group (NMG)., 9 Mar. 2022, [web.archive.org/web/20220511205246/https://hudsonreporter.com/2022/03/09/two-long-time-north-hudson-mayors-are-guaranteed-victory-in-the-may-10-election/](http://web.archive.org/web/20220511205246/https://hudsonreporter.com/2022/03/09/two-long-time-north-hudson-mayors-are-guaranteed-victory-in-the-may-10-election/).

"Nicholas Sacco." *Ballotpedia*, Lucy Burns Institute , [ballotpedia.org/Nicholas\\_Sacco](https://ballotpedia.org/Nicholas_Sacco).

Zeitlinger, Ron. "Sires to Be Sworn in as West New York Mayor by Gov. Murphy." *NJ.Com*, Advance Publications, 15 May 2023, [www.nj.com/hudson/2023/05/sires-to-be-sworn-in-as-west-new-york-mayor-by-gov-murphy.html](http://www.nj.com/hudson/2023/05/sires-to-be-sworn-in-as-west-new-york-mayor-by-gov-murphy.html).

Mosca, David. "Kearny Mayor, Town Council Members to Be Sworn In." *NJ.Com*, Advanced Publications, 3 Jan. 2018, [www.nj.com/hudson/2018/01/kearny\\_mayor\\_sworn\\_in.html](http://www.nj.com/hudson/2018/01/kearny_mayor_sworn_in.html).

lower voter turnout. For instance, in his first re-election former Kearny, NJ, mayor Alberto Santos<sup>11 12</sup> received 5,494 votes with a 49% voter turnout in 2001.<sup>13</sup> But twenty years later, he won with 3,674 votes with a 28% voter turnout and received 37% fewer votes than he did twenty years earlier.<sup>14</sup> In 2021, Santos won 98% of the votes cast, which could indicate that the majority of voters approve of him. Yet, if one examines the number of votes he received, his approval has declined over time as fewer voters have chosen to cast their ballots at all.

In 2021, the incumbent mayor of Hoboken, NJ, Ravinder Singh Bhalla, in a city of 57,703<sup>15</sup> was the only person to declare his candidacy.<sup>16</sup> He received 93% of the vote<sup>17</sup> with a voter turnout of 37%; he was not re-elected by the majority of registered voters in Hoboken. In the neighboring Union City, NJ, and Weehawken, NJ, their respective mayors, Brian P. Stack and Richard F. Turner have been re-elected with no opposition in at least ten years.<sup>18</sup> Turner has not faced a challenge since 2002 and while Stack was challenged, he dominated both his contested races in 2006 and 2010.

---

<sup>11</sup> In 2023, Mayor Al Santos was appointed as a Hudson County Superior Court Judge,

<sup>12</sup> Canessa, Kevin . “Santos Resigns Mayoralty to Join Bench; Doyle Is Now Acting Mayor of Kearny.” *The Observer Online*, 26 June 2023, [www.theobserver.com/2023/06/26/santos-resigns-mayoralty-to-join-bench-doyle-is-now-acting-mayor-of-kearny/](http://www.theobserver.com/2023/06/26/santos-resigns-mayoralty-to-join-bench-doyle-is-now-acting-mayor-of-kearny/).

<sup>13</sup> [Hudson County Clerk General Election Results 2001](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Hudson County Clerk General Election Results 2021](#)

<sup>15</sup> Population information for Hoboken, NJ is from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/hobokencitynewjersey/PST045222#PST045222>==

<sup>16</sup> Cunningham, Matthew. “Ravi Bhalla to Run Unopposed for Hoboken Mayor; Three Council Seats up for Grabs.” *The Stute - The Independent Student Newspaper of Stevens Institute of Technology*, Steven’s Institute of Technology, 8 Oct. 2021, [thestute.com/2021/10/08/ravi-bhalla-to-run-unopposed-for-hoboken-mayor-three-council-seats-up-for-grabs/](http://thestute.com/2021/10/08/ravi-bhalla-to-run-unopposed-for-hoboken-mayor-three-council-seats-up-for-grabs/).

<sup>17</sup> [Hudson County Clerk General Election Results 2021](#)

<sup>18</sup> Israel, Daniel. “Two Long-Time North Hudson Mayors Are Guaranteed Victory in the May 10 Election.” *Hudson Reporter*, Newspaper Media Group (NMG)., 9 Mar. 2022, [web.archive.org/web/20220511205246/https://hudsonreporter.com/2022/03/09/two-long-time-north-hudson-mayors-are-guaranteed-victory-in-the-may-10-election/](http://web.archive.org/web/20220511205246/https://hudsonreporter.com/2022/03/09/two-long-time-north-hudson-mayors-are-guaranteed-victory-in-the-may-10-election/).

Ballots used in elections in both Weehawken and Union City follow county lines. This is the standard in Hudson County elections. The county line or party line forms the ballot in such a way that the candidates representing the same party are listed in one vertical and occasionally horizontal line on the ballot. Who ends up on the ballot is determined by the primary election, but who gets on the primary election ballot depends a great deal on who the local party agrees should run<sup>19</sup>. According to Professor Julia Sass Rubin at Rutgers University in New Jersey, out of 208 incumbent state legislatures in New Jersey on a party line, 205 won re-election. While nineteen incumbents were denied the endorsement of their party, only nine won. Furthermore, county lines are determined by the chair of a candidate's county party. In 2019 according to Rubin, the Union County Democratic Party chief, Nicholas Scutari removed several candidates from the county line on the ballot, because these candidates endorsed his opponent in the 2018 election for County Sheriff. Local and county party chiefs have significant power and those who are elected or seek elected office have to please them. Because the party chiefs select the candidates and determine their spot on the ballot, there is a concentration of power in the hands of a few. This may explain why voter turnout has been declining in New Jersey for the past twenty years<sup>20</sup>. The mayors mentioned earlier, have all been chosen to be on the ballot by the Hudson County Democratic Organization and with the backing of the party, they have remained in their elected office unopposed in Hudson County elections. These election dates can also be chosen by the cities. Under the Faulkner Act,<sup>21</sup> New Jersey municipalities have the ability to

---

<sup>19</sup> Rubin, Julia Sass (2023) "The Impact of New Jersey's County Line Primary Ballots on Election Outcomes, Politics, and Policy," *Seton Hall Journal of Legislation and Public Policy*: Vol. 48: Iss. 1, Article 3., DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60095/ERRT2640>, available at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/shlj/vol48/iss1/3..>

<sup>20</sup> Carrera, Catherine. "More People than Ever Are Registered to Vote, but Fewer Actually Do." *North Jersey.Com*, North Jersey Media Group, 18 Dec. 2017, [www.northjersey.com/story/news/new-jersey/2017/12/18/more-people-registered-vote-but-fewer-and-voting-reform-bill-dies-again-democrats-hopeful-revive-und/954599001/](http://www.northjersey.com/story/news/new-jersey/2017/12/18/more-people-registered-vote-but-fewer-and-voting-reform-bill-dies-again-democrats-hopeful-revive-und/954599001/).

<sup>21</sup> New Jersey State Law: [40:69A-150](http://www.nj.gov/education/assessment/40:69A-150). [Municipal elections: time](http://www.nj.gov/education/assessment/40:69A-150)

choose the time for their elections for either May or November. Elections in May are off cycle with significantly lower voter turnout than elections in November during a Presidential year. Bayonne, North Bergen, Union City, West New York, and Weehawken have decided to hold their elections in May, and not on the second Tuesday of November as is common. Election dates matter for voter participation. Elections during presidential election years have higher voter turnout, which could lead to increased competition, and perhaps even unexpected outcomes.

Hudson County voter participation is lower than the national average. This may be attributed to the dominance of the Democratic Party in the county. The party line voting further gives selected candidates uncontested elections. This leads to longer stays in elected office for incumbents. Finally, due to the lack of competitive election, not only within Hudson county but elsewhere in New Jersey, the low voter turnout benefits the incumbents. Since the outcomes are nearly pre-determine, it is not surprising that Hudson County continues to have the lowest turnout in New Jersey. The lack of voter participation can have profound effects on the county's democratic processes.

## Work Cited

## Primary Sources

- “Elections Archive.” *Hudson County Clerk, NJ*,  
[www.hudsoncountyclerk.org/elections-archives/](http://www.hudsoncountyclerk.org/elections-archives/). Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.
- “Past Election Results.” Monmouth County Votes, Monmouth County Clerk,  
[www.monmouthcountyvotes.com/elections/past-election-results/](http://www.monmouthcountyvotes.com/elections/past-election-results/). Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.
- “Quickfacts: Hoboken City, New Jersey; United States.” *U.S. Census Bureau*, U.S. Department of Commerce, 1 July 2022,  
[www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/hobokencitynewjersey,US/PST045222](http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/hobokencitynewjersey,US/PST045222). Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.
- New Jersey, State Legislature. Optional Municipal Charter Law. *Faulkner Act*. 1950, N.J.S.A. 40:69A-1,  
[https://www.nj.gov/dca/divisions/dlgs/resources/misc\\_docs/optional\\_muni\\_charter\\_law.pdf](https://www.nj.gov/dca/divisions/dlgs/resources/misc_docs/optional_muni_charter_law.pdf).
- “NJ DOS - Division of Elections - Election Results Archive.” Official Site of the State of New Jersey, NJ Department of State,  
[www.nj.gov/state/elections/election-information-results.shtml](http://www.nj.gov/state/elections/election-information-results.shtml). Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.

## Secondary Sources

- Canessa, Kevin. “Santos Resigns Mayoralty to Join Bench; Doyle Is Now Acting Mayor of Kearny.” *The Observer Online*, 26 June 2023,  
[www.theobserver.com/2023/06/26/santos-resigns-mayoralty-to-join-bench-doyle-is-now-acting-mayor-of-kearny/](http://www.theobserver.com/2023/06/26/santos-resigns-mayoralty-to-join-bench-doyle-is-now-acting-mayor-of-kearny/).
- Carrera, Catherine. “More People than Ever Are Registered to Vote, but Fewer Actually Do.” *North Jersey.Com*, North Jersey Media Group, 18 Dec. 2017,  
[www.northjersey.com/story/news/new-jersey/2017/12/18/more-people-registered-vote-but-fewer-and-voting-reform-bill-dies-again-democrats-hopeful-revive-und/954599001/](http://www.northjersey.com/story/news/new-jersey/2017/12/18/more-people-registered-vote-but-fewer-and-voting-reform-bill-dies-again-democrats-hopeful-revive-und/954599001/).
- Cunningham, Matthew. “Ravi Bhalla to Run Unopposed for Hoboken Mayor; Three Council Seats up for Grabs.” *The Stute - The Independent Student Newspaper of Stevens Institute of Technology*, Steven’s Institute of Technology, 8 Oct. 2021,  
[thestute.com/2021/10/08/ravi-bhalla-to-run-unopposed-for-hoboken-mayor-three-council-seats-up-for-grabs/](http://thestute.com/2021/10/08/ravi-bhalla-to-run-unopposed-for-hoboken-mayor-three-council-seats-up-for-grabs/).
- Israel, Daniel. “Two Long-Time North Hudson Mayors Are Guaranteed Victory in the May 10 Election.” *Hudson Reporter*, Newspaper Media Group (NMG)., 9 Mar. 2022,

[web.archive.org/web/20220511205246/https://hudsonreporter.com/2022/03/09/two-long-time-north-hudson-mayors-are-guaranteed-victory-in-the-may-10-election/](https://web.archive.org/web/20220511205246/https://hudsonreporter.com/2022/03/09/two-long-time-north-hudson-mayors-are-guaranteed-victory-in-the-may-10-election/)  
“Nicholas Sacco.” *Ballotpedia*, Lucy Burns Institute , [ballotpedia.org/Nicholas\\_Sacco](https://ballotpedia.org/Nicholas_Sacco).  
Rubin, Julia Sass (2023) "The Impact of New Jersey’s County Line Primary Ballots on Election Outcomes, Politics, and Policy," *Seton Hall Journal of Legislation and Public Policy: Vol. 48: Iss. 1, Article 3.*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60095/ERRT2640>, available at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/shlj/vol48/iss1/3>.  
Mosca, David. “Kearny Mayor, Town Council Members to Be Sworn In.” *NJ.Com*, Advanced Publications, 3 Jan. 2018, [www.nj.com/hudson/2018/01/kearny\\_mayor\\_sworn\\_in.html](http://www.nj.com/hudson/2018/01/kearny_mayor_sworn_in.html).  
Zeitlinger, Ron. “Sires to Be Sworn in as West New York Mayor by Gov. Murphy.” *NJ.Com*, Advance Publications, 15 May 2023, [www.nj.com/hudson/2023/05/sires-to-be-sworn-in-as-west-new-york-mayor-by-gov-murphy.html](http://www.nj.com/hudson/2023/05/sires-to-be-sworn-in-as-west-new-york-mayor-by-gov-murphy.html).