

# Growing number of voters ignore primary elections

## Turnout fails to top 40% so far this year

By Kathy Kiely  
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Halfway through this year's primary season, voters are showing little interest in picking candidates for the Nov. 7 elections that will determine control of Congress and elect more than one-third of the nation's governors.

Twenty-five states held primaries through June 27. Sixteen of the 22 states that have certified figures or provided estimates to USA TODAY recorded voter turnout lower than 2002,

the last national election that wasn't in a presidential year.

Some experts worry that a voter boycott of primaries could result in politics being dominated by single-issue special-interest groups.

"The higher the turnout, the more representative an election is," says Rhodes Cook, publisher of a non-partisan political newsletter. "The lower the turnout, the more the election is likely to reflect a wing of a party or an ideology."

Turnout hasn't cracked 40% in any state. In most, primary participation was in the 20%-30% range. Idaho, Illinois, North Carolina, Oregon, Virginia and West Virginia posted their low-

### Declining turnout

These states posted their lowest primary turnouts in at least eight years. 2006 turnout:

Oregon	39%
Idaho	26%
West Virginia	26%
Illinois	25%
North Carolina	12%
Virginia	3.5%

Sources: Secretaries of State and USA TODAY research

By Karl Gelles, USA TODAY

### States' turnout trends

■ Low primary tallies, 4A

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So far, the year's rock-bottom has come in Virginia, which did not have a 2002 primary. The June 13 Democratic Senate primary drew national attention and was open to all Virginians, regardless of their party. Fewer than 4% of more than 4.5 million eligible voters showed up to nominate former Navy secretary Jim Webb to face Sen. George Allen in November.

Americans' ho-hum attitude about primaries doesn't necessarily mean they will stay away from the polls this fall. More than one out of three Americans are giving the upcoming congressional elections "quite a

lot of thought," according to a USA TODAY/Gallup Poll taken last month.

"In any given year, primary turnout will not predict general-election turnout," says Curtis Gans of American University's Center for the Study of the American Electorate

Gans is expecting "close to a record low" turnout for this year's primaries but thinks it will be "comparatively high" in the fall. "The polarization around George Bush will drive this election," he says.

Still, he's concerned the no-shows have devalued the importance of voting. "We essentially have gotten rid of the religion of civic duty," Gans says.