

## Fact Sheet #3: What We Know About Ohio's 2016 Statewide Primary

By Lynda Mayer and Dianne Herman, Co-Chairs, Primary Election Systems Study Committee

This third of four Fact Sheets summarizes for Ohio's League members some of the expected and unexpected results of our observation of Ohio's congressional, legislative and countywide primaries on March 15th of this year. But don't look here for findings about presidential or judicial primaries. -- We can't do much to influence the national political parties who control the former, and LWVO already has positions on how the latter ought to be conducted in Ohio (nonpartisan primary AND general election, unlike the current peculiar hybrid). We also did not compare Ohio's statewide primary with those of other states, the massive scope of which would have overwhelmed our resources. So, with those caveats.....

Each member "observed" and analyzed one race, from U.S. Senate down to Summit County Clerk of Courts -- an unscientific sample, to be sure, but one which did nevertheless represent a demographic, political and geographic cross-section of Ohio. We gathered vote totals and computed percentages of ballots cast in each race, and we contrasted districts or counties by many variables, hoping to find promising correlations.

**EXPECTED OUTCOMES.** Over 70 percent of Ohio's voters (prior to this primary) were officially unaffiliated, as they had no recent history of voting in Ohio's partisan primaries. However, overall turnout was over 42 percent this March, which means that many "independents" did indeed vote, at least for president. That proves that unaffiliated status does NOT prevent the interested from voting in Ohio. Newspaper reports also put the percentage of "crossover" voting (from one party to another) at over five percent. As our focus travelled further "down" the ballot, however, the participation shrank considerably -- congressional races averaged 33 percent and legislative and countywide races sank to 25 percent and lower. Readers may recall the results of our municipal primary research last summer, which was an even more dismal 15 percent. So, with these numbers in our heads, we went looking for variables that could possibly explain them....

**UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES:** One might think that the following factors might produce some answers: income levels, population density, diversity, gerrymandering, competitiveness, party endorsements, incumbency, publicity, or the preponderance of one party's voters over the other's. Although our sample was too small to trust our exact figures, we were disappointed to learn that participation rarely varied a point or two above or below the 25 or 26 percent mark. We cannot venture many accurate guesses based upon comparing these variables. We did, however, surmise (intuitively but without proof) that contested elections featuring strong party involvement, good public information, and unpredictable outcomes should attract more interest and hence more turnout.

**WHY DID THE WINNERS WIN?** You will not be surprised to learn that the most frequent answer was lack of opposition, followed closely by the fact that the winner was a popular incumbent or had wide name recognition.

**DID THE PRIMARY PAVE THE ROAD TO A MEANINGFUL GENERAL ELECTION?**

Emphatically, no. All but two of our observers reported "no contest," either because of no opposition or due to a heavy partisan imbalance in the jurisdiction. Nearly all outcomes are completely predictable, a finding which should surprise no one. And this survey alone did not produce or suggest solutions to the problem.

Stay tuned for Fact Sheet #4, which will summarize the feedback of many experts, advocates and state League representatives from around the country, surveyed in the hope that consensus might emerge from a wide net of knowledgeable election buffs. There MUST be a better system, right ??????