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Alabama's midterm election turnout worst in at least 36 years

Updated: Nov. 09, 2022, 7:56 a.m. | Published: Nov. 09, 2022, 7:53 a.m.

Singleton v. Allen
2:21-CV-01291-AMM-
Date 2/10/2025
Plaintiff Exhibit Label No. 66

Exhibit
Slay 16



Outside the entrance to the Daphne Civic Center during the general election on Tuesday, November 8, 2022. (John Sharp/jsharp@al.com).

By John Sharp | jsharp@al.com

A lack of competition from the Democratic Party and little-to-no TV campaign advertising in the weeks leading up to midterm election meant that Alabamians overwhelmingly stayed home on Tuesday.

The turnout was the lowest in Alabama during a statewide general election in at least 36 years, according to data compiled on the Secretary of State's website.

Statewide turnout was only 38.5%, or 1.4 million of the state's 3.68 million registered voters.

"I haven't had a serious general election client in 12 years," said Jon Gray, a Mobile-based GOP political consultant. "There is no general election."

The poor turnout continued a troublesome trend over the past two years of declining interest in non-presidential elections in Alabama.

- The May 24 primary saw only 23.4% show up to cast a vote despite some hotly contested Republican races. That figure represented the second lowest turnout during a midterm election since 2000.
- The June 21 primary runoff saw only 13% of registered voters cast a ballot. That represented the third lowest turnout rate Alabama has seen in the last 35-plus years of major runoff elections – those featuring big statewide races like U.S. Senate or governor.
- Only a quarter of voters showed up to participate during the 2021 city elections in Birmingham and Mobile. In both cities, the incumbent mayors easily won re-election. The turnout in Mobile was a sharp drop from previous mayoral elections, when 37% to 46% of registered voters would go to the polls.

"To politicians like me, we live for (elections) like a quarterback lives for the Super Bowl," said Angi Horn, a Montgomery-based political consultant. "But for most people, sadly, it's just another Tuesday. And that's the truth."

Fewer than 40% of voters showed up in some of the state's largest counties – Mobile (34.4%), Madison (39%), Montgomery (36.4%), and Tuscaloosa (35%). Jefferson (41%) and Shelby (41.8%) had slightly better showings.

'Poor performance'

The Democratic Party's candidates were largely underfunded, and unable to mount a serious challenge in a state where Republicans enjoy a supermajority status in the Legislature and control every constitutional office.

Alabama Secretary of State John Merrill predicted a turnout between 45% to 50%, which he admits was wildly off. He said he expected Democrats to show up to the election, which has happened in recent midterm contests whenever Democrats fielded better funded and well-known candidates.

In 2018, nearly 50% of voters showed up to the polls during a governor's race pitting Republican incumbent Gov. Kay Ivey against Democratic challenger Walt Maddox, the mayor of Tuscaloosa. Maddox spent \$2.6 million during that election cycle.

But this time around, Ivey was challenged by Yolanda Flowers, who spent a paltry \$12,500 throughout the campaign.



Alabama Secretary of State John Merrill (Mike Cason/mcason@al.com)

"I didn't anticipate that there would be that poor of a performance among Democrats

statewide," Merrill, a Republican, said. "It was the worst in the history of this state. It's not even close."

Indeed, the Democratic Party did not even field candidates in a half dozen statewide races. Their absence encouraged the Libertarian Party to run candidates on Tuesday in hopes of securing 20% of the vote in a statewide race to retain ballot access during the 2024 election. That did not happen, as Libertarians fell short of their goals in all statewide races.

For Republicans, it was landslide victories up and down the ballot. Ivey amassed more than 67% of the vote easily defeating Flowers and Libertarian candidate Dr. Jimmy Blake. Katie Britt, the former chief of staff to retiring Senator Richard Shelby, also received 67% of the vote over her Democratic opponent Will Boyd and Libertarian candidate John Sophocleus.

Republicans racked up easy wins in other statewide contests in which a Democrat ran. State Rep. Wes Allen received over 65% of the vote to win the Secretary of State's seat and Steve Marshall was re-elected as attorney general with over 68%.

"I just felt like we would have more Democratic support than we actually had even though the candidates were not that strong," Merrill said. "But obviously, I was wrong."

'Without intrigue'

Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey wins 2nd full term

Turnout was lower than the 2014 general election, in which 39.8% of voters showed up during an election in which then-incumbent Gov. Robert Bentley defeated Democratic challenger Parker Griffith. That turnout, according to Secretary of State statistics, is the lowest in a general election contest since at least 1986.

General elections in which Democrats were competitive, and actually won in 1998 -- saw turnouts at 57% and 58%.

Horn said Alabama lacks the excitement that other states see due to more competitive races for Congress and Governor.

"The minority party (Alabama Democrats) do not seem to have much organization in their 'get out to vote' (effort) and the vast majority of legislative races are unopposed," she said.

Other states, Horn said, have candidates that inspire voters to show up during the midterm elections. Turnouts in Ohio and Pennsylvania were expected to be high. In Georgia, early voting turnout set new all-time records.

"Without the intrigue of a Pennsylvania or an Ohio, it's unfair and unrealistic to have those same numbers (in Alabama)," Horn said.

Jess Brown, a retired political science professor at Athens State University, said the turnout reflects what he and other political scientists believe is a "nationalization" of politics in which contests highlighted on national cable TV shows and presidential races entice voters, while other races -- like midterm contests in one-party dominated states -- do not.

"We have definitely become, in my lifetime, more and more presidential centric and that has to do with the national press coverage," Brown said.

He said that some contests on the ballot in Madison County were likely unknown to voters.

"We had a competitive sheriff's race in Madison County with at least two candidates on the ballot," said Brown, referring to Republican Kevin Turner's race against Libertarian Alan Barksdale, which Turner easily won.

"A generation ago, there was a lot of hub bub to include local press coverage about a sheriff's race," Brown said. "Who was the sheriff in a county mattered a lot. But I know

there were a lot of people on (Tuesday) who didn't know there was a sheriff's race until (the election)."

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