

OUR VIEW: 34.5 percent voter turnout is not nearly good enough

Elkhart, Indiana THE GOSHEN NEWS May 6, 2016



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Haily Hite, Elkhart, casts her vote Tuesday at the Elkhart County Public Services Building in Dunlap. Poll workers said voting at the center was steady throughout the day Tuesday, but picked up at about 3:30 p.m.

Another Election Day is in our rear-view mirror, and for a change Indiana proved a notable battleground in a presidential primary as Donald Trump ended the bids of Ted Cruz and Paul Kasich on his way to becoming the presumptive Republican nominee. And Democratic presidential underdog Bernie Sanders kept his run alive — albeit on life support — by upsetting front runner Hillary Clinton.

The polarizing energy of this year's presidential primaries managed to move the needle on voter turnout here in Elkhart County, where 45,674 people took the time to cast a vote this election cycle. That's the most in recent memory and topped the 44,833 cast in the 2008 presidential primary. Still, Tuesday's turnout is sad considering there are 132,243 registered voters in Elkhart County. That equates to just 34.5 percent in local electorate participation.

SO, AS WE PRAISE a jump in participation out of the side of our mouth, we really should be grumbling louder about the lack of participation here in a state that is notorious for ballot apathy. Participating in elections has never been easier. Citizens can register to vote when obtaining their driver's license or do it online (although we wish the cutoff dates would be extended). Early/absentee voting is conducted the month leading up to Election Day. And Elkhart County has switched to a Vote Center format, meaning residents can cast their votes at any of the county's 27 vote centers locations (many of which are on public transportation routes) between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. Weather on Tuesday was also not a factor as it was likely the nicest day of the year so far.

What really infuriates us regarding the lack of voter turnout is it's not fair to the local candidates who make the commitment to run for public office. We had some great choices on the Elkhart County ballot this year and each of those contested races deserved a higher level of interest.

MORE PEOPLE COME OUT for presidential elections because they're sexy. But the true substance of American politics resides in local office, where normal, everyday citizens wield the

most influence over the governance of their own lives. Presidential candidates occasionally blow through town with their entourages and press pools, but our county commissioners live among us. Our mayors live among us. Our state senators and representatives live among us.

Without a presidential primary in 2014, just 19,166 Elkhart County residents bothered to vote. That's 15.8 percent. That would be laughable if it wasn't so pathetic. Maybe it's just easier for people to get fired up about presidential candidates because they're spoon fed information and drama on cable news and syndicated radio. In comparison, there's very little drama in local elections, and residents need to make a point to educate themselves on the candidates and the issues. It takes effort and acumen to make an informed choice locally.

We need to do better than 34.5 percent, especially for our local candidates.