

Editorial: Civic engagement suffered during ugly election season

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For all of the hype surrounding Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election, the actual numbers reveal that voter participation was underwhelming.

The ex-reality TV star and real estate billionaire tapped into a segment of the population's fear and anger to win the presidency. He legitimately prevailed through the Electoral College with apparently 306 votes to 232 for Democratic rival Hillary Clinton. Still, Trump also became only the fifth candidate in U.S. history to win the Oval Office seat despite losing the popular vote. He won the White House with fewer Americans' votes than the previous three Republican nominees — George W. Bush in 2004, John McCain in 2008 and Mitt Romney in 2012.

Aside from that historical quirk, the levels of voting deserve the nation's attention. After all of the attention-grabbing nastiness, all of the high-rated televised debates and all of the late-night tweets, just 56.9 percent of the voting-eligible population cast a ballot in the '16 election, according to the United States Elections Project maintained by respected University of Florida political scientist Michael McDonald. That's a nearly 2 percent decrease from 2012 and more than 5 percent down from 2008.

The "voting-eligible" population differs from registered voters. Voting-eligible Americans are those ages 18 and up, regardless of voter registration, who are not non-citizens of the U.S. or ineligible felons. The Elections Project considers the voting-eligible calculation most relevant because voter registration rolls contain people no longer living where they are registered, and because of variations in states' registration practices. (North Dakota has no voter registration, for example.)

Indiana does not shine in its turnouts of voting-eligible residents. In the 2014 midterm election, the state ranked last in turnout at 28 percent. Indiana improved to 55.9 percent this time, drawing a higher percentage of eligible voters to the polls than 13 other states. The majority of states, though, outperformed the Hoosier state, especially its Midwestern neighbors — Minnesota at 74 percent, Wisconsin 68.3, Michigan 64.6, Ohio 62.8 and Illinois 60.1, as well as Southern neighbor Kentucky at 58.7.

Turnout also dropped in Vigo County with 51 percent of registered voters participating (voting-eligible numbers are not available by county), down from 53 percent in 2012 and 56 percent in 2008. The only metropolitan county in Indiana lower than Vigo in Tuesday's election was Delaware (home of Muncie) at 50 percent.

Political will is necessary to engage more Vigo Countians, Hoosiers and Americans in the process, especially in the wake of an election that sent its winner to the White House with less than 26 percent of eligible citizens voting for him. Election Day registration and automatic registration when Americans make a transaction at their motor vehicle bureau would be two crucial steps toward progress.

The changes cannot end there, though. Congress needs to reform the polluted campaign finance laws that allow shadowy corporate interests to pour millions into influencing elections for their own benefit. States, including Indiana, must turn over the drawing of legislative districts — currently set to benefit one party or the other — to independent commissions. Finally, the candidates and their parties should stop demonizing rivals, which alienates young voters, inhibiting their interest in voting.

The ugliness of Election 2016 was a hit for TV ratings and social media clicks, but a dud in terms of civic engagement.