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Poll Turnout Sees Highs, Lows

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STAFF WRITER

Hindered by light rain and heavy traffic problems throughout the city, New Yorkers nevertheless marched in a steady and mostly orderly procession to polling places in yesterday's citywide primary.

While many election observers said the turnout would be lower than the 800,000 voters expected in the aborted Sept. 11 primary — and turnout appeared to be depressed in areas especially affected by the World Trade Center attacks — there was intense political interest in some neighborhoods.

In Washington Heights and Harlem, for example, fiercely fought races for open Council seats boosted the crowds at polls.

"My impression is that the turnout is much heavier uptown than downtown," said Douglas Kellner, the Manhattan Democrat on the Board of Elections. "Everywhere I've gone in Harlem and Washington Heights, there are long lines, even in the middle of the afternoon."

In Queens, turnout appeared to be slightly lower than two weeks ago in most neighborhoods.

At Public School 101 on Russell Place in Forest Hills, for example, poll workers said turnout was about 10 percent behind the pace of that seen on Sept. 11, when polls were open for three hours.

"I think the delay and no politicking," said poll coordinator Harriette Netburn, citing her theories for the quiet day. "And everything that's happened." Outside, politicians handed out little stickers that read, "9-11-2001. We will never forget."

If the World Trade Center attacks had dampened voter interest in Forest Hills, vigorous turnout was reported in Astoria, mayoral hopeful Peter Vallone's neighborhood, as well as in College Point, Fresh Meadows and Little Neck, according to Evan Stavisky, a political consultant.

With the soaring popularity of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, a small percentage of voters cast write-in ballots, apparently in a show of support for the outgoing mayor.

Stephen Weiner, the Queens Republican elections board member, said the number of write-ins varied from poll site to poll site. "Obviously, it's a minority," he said.

Kellner estimated that Giuliani would capture 1 percent to 2 percent of the vote.

Low turnout in some areas of the city could complicate the count. As many as 10 candidates are vying for the Democratic nominations in some open Council districts, and those elections could turn on the thinnest of margins.

With a count of the paper ballots expected to begin Friday morning, a dispute continues between the Board of Elections and the mayoral candidates over how those ballots should be counted.

The agency appealed a Sept. 10 order by Queens Supreme Court Justice Steven Fisher, who ruled that judges — not elections inspectors — should decide which affidavit ballots to open and count.

An appellate court hearing is scheduled for today in Brooklyn in that case.

While the Board of Elections was plagued by machine breakdowns and other polling place failures in last November's general election, yesterday's primary drew fewer complaints.

In Manhattan, as many as 40 machines had broken down before 10 a.m., but most were quickly repaired by mechanics dispatched to the scene.

"I think they're heroes for being able to do this in such a short time," said Gene Russianoff of the New York Public Interest Group. Call volume was low to NYPIRG's voter complaint hotline.

Elections experts had feared poll workers wouldn't show for the hastily rescheduled election, but most did.

An exception was at the Jacob Riis Houses on East 6th Street, where police had to break down the doors because a worker didn't appear to open the polls, according to Frederic Umane, the Manhattan Republican on the elections board.

Other complaints, once again, involved translators. In the hotly contested 20th Council district in Flushing, about 30 Korean-American voters left polling places without casting ballots.

In some cases, there were no translators available to help them, according to the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund.

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