

Primary turnout just short of national record

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WASHINGTON - Primary turnout broke records in two-thirds of states this election season and fell just short of setting a national record, according to a report released Monday.

American University's Center for the Study of the American Electorate puts the overall turnout at 30.2 percent of the electorate, close to the record high of 30.9 percent set in 1972, the first election in which primaries became decisive in party nominations.

Curtis Gans, author of the study, attributed the record turnouts in 23 states to a competitive contest that has been "close, content-full and conflict-full."

The record turnouts also are due in part to the historic nature of the Democratic race, experts said, as the possibility of the first female or African-American president has energized many parts of the electorate.

"It's been a very unusual race, particularly with the Democrats," said Benjamin Barber, a senior fellow at Demos, a policy think tank. "Barack Obama has brought in young voters and maximized the African-American vote while at the same time Hillary Clinton has captured many core, working-class

Democrats."

The combination of factors so far has brought 54 million Americans to the polls, according to Gans' study.

"The contest features provocative candidates, new, typically nonpolitical voters coming out for Obama and a deep dissatisfaction with what's going on in Washington," Barber said. "For turnout, it's a perfect electoral storm."

Primary election turnout is an imperfect predictor of general election turnout, Gans said.

"They are separate elections, and a correlation might not exist," he said. "In 1972, the year of the highest presidential primary turnout, turnout in the general election experienced the largest decline (5.3 percentage points) of any election since World War II."

The 1972 election, the first in which 18-year-olds could vote, also was an election with an unpopular war - the Vietnam conflict - at its center.

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"The Democratic Party was at war with themselves over the war in Vietnam," Barber said. "The current war, and president Bush's high disapproval rate, will probably drive turnout in November."

Of the 54 million primary votes cast, 35 million have gone to Democrats and 19 million to Republicans, according to the report.

High turnout does not necessarily harm the Republicans, Gans said.

"In 2004, the highest turnout election since 1968, President Bush won. In 1968, Richard Nixon won," Gans said. "Two of the three lowest turnout elections since the 1920s produced victories for Harry S. Truman (1948) and Bill Clinton (1996)," both Democrats.

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