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Getting in gear for Super Tuesday

Hot presidential election could bring record numbers

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Pack away the leftover pork sandwiches and pizza rolls from Super Bowl Sunday and roll out the political pundits - its time for Super Tuesday.

In a week where everything in America has been, shall we say, supersized, today is the day when residents of 24 states will cast their votes in Democratic and/or Republican primary or caucus.

DuPage Election Commission Executive Director Bob Saar said he's expecting a higher-than-usual voter turnout since Illinois moved its primary up to today's politically packed date.

"The thinking at this point is that given that Illinois is right in the middle of the primary selection process, meaning they're much more relevant than they have been for decades, it's somewhat unpredictable," Saar said.

In the past Saar said 25 to 28 percent of registered voters have turned out for a presidential primary. With the position Illinois is in, coupled with a ballot packed with propositions for voters in several cities, villages, school districts and townships, he's hoping "we break the 30, 35 percent mark."

Weather a factor

A lot is at stake for presidential nominees hoping to cash in on delegate-wealthy states such as California and New York. According to CNN.com, 1,681 delegates are at stake in 16 primaries and seven caucuses for the Democrats and 1,020 delegates are at stake in 15 primaries and six caucuses for Republicans.

One factor, however, may work against voters. Inclement conditions could prevent some from trekking to their polling place, said Will County Clerk Nancy Schultz Voots.

"The weather makes a difference," she said. "With early voting in place, the thought is maybe people who were concerned about what the weather would be on election day took advantage of early voting."

It looks as though some of the nastier weather could hold off until later in the day. Nathan Marsili, meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Romeoville, said today's forecast calls for some rain in the morning, then rain mixed with snow or sleet in the evening, changing over to all snow by late evening. As of Monday a winter storm watch was set for this evening through Wednesday afternoon, Marsili said.

Record turnout?

Voots said while the normal percentage of Will County voters in a presidential primary is around 28.47 percent, she said she believes close to 50 percent will head to the polls.

"It's the date, and now that there's no incumbent running (in the presidential race), it's a more open field," she said. "The enthusiasm is out there."

Stephen Maynard Caliendo, associate professor of political science at Naperville's North Central College, said he "wouldn't be surprised at all if we had record numbers" in the primary because of many of the reasons Saar and Voots mentioned: early voting, neither party having a nominee wrapped up and Illinois being a Super Tuesday state.

"The final thing that matters is (Democratic presidential nominee Barack) Obama on the ticket," Maynard Caliendo said "Illinoisans have a candidate who's making good strides to the party nomination."

North Central College definitely has political fever, he said, and a party open to the public to view Super Tuesday results is set for Goldsponn Hall, room 20.

As for having enough ballots on hand and the proper amount of judges to work the polling sites, both Saar and Voots said they're confident that will happen. Voots said by law they have to print enough ballots so that if 100 percent of registered voters in each precinct turned out, there would be enough. Saar said election judges have been well-trained, with smaller training classes taking place for technical judges.

Voots said that, when voters head to the polls, one of the most important steps they can take is to make sure they are given the correct ballot, since not all are the same. Illinois residents must declare their party preference in today's primary and will receive the corresponding party ballot. Voots encourages people to ask questions of the judges if they are unsure about anything.

"Once you put the ballot in the ballot box, that's it," she said.

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