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Election may tell who still lives here - Voting records can help population counts
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As voters across New Orleans anxiously wait to learn the winners of Tuesday's elections, demographers and political scientists will be watching the races with an eye toward news of a different sort.

With turnout expected to approach record highs, the vote could provide the latest solid snapshot of the city's population, a figure that has been tough to nail down since Hurricane Katrina.

"When we look at turnout Tuesday, I think we'll be able to say what the profile of this community is," said Greg Rigamer, chief executive of the New Orleans research firm GCR & Associates. "This is going to be a real pivotal moment in defining who's here and who's not."

Unlike local or statewide elections, in which turnout can vary dramatically, "there is a very predictable pattern from presidential election to presidential election," Rigamer said.

The number of voters who cast ballots in presidential elections in 2000 and 2004 hovered around 40 percent of the city's total population, state and federal records show.

Rigamer said he will try to put a finger on New Orleans' current population by looking at a breakdown of who voted in prior presidential elections by age and by race and "applying those same standards to what we see today."

The secretary of state usually publishes the precise number of voters who showed up to the polls -- breaking the numbers down into categories that also include race and political affiliation -- about two weeks after an election.

In addition to providing a clearer portrait of the city's population, the voting data could offer a window into the future of city politics. Though the statistics won't be used for this purpose, the numbers will probably indicate how much electoral clout New Orleans and St. Bernard Parish have lost compared with the rest of Louisiana, and thus how they may be affected by redistricting following the 2010 Census.

The figures also will hint at how the city's hidebound racial politics have changed since the flood. Recent elections, including the district attorney's race on the ballot Tuesday, suggest that white candidates can be viable in citywide contests, which was rarely the case before the storm.

University of New Orleans political scientist Ed Chervenak agreed that Tuesday's turnout will offer a strong measure of who lives in the city now, though he cautioned that the picture will be incomplete.

"The biggest problem is that it only includes the adult population, so we're missing those age 17 and younger," he said. "It could be that we take the number of voters and the school population (to) come up with a reasonable population number."

Chervenak also pointed out an anomaly that may make it look as though New Orleans voters were less than enthusiastic about the election: "We'll be accused of having a low

turnout rate because there's some error in our registration number," he said.

As always, Tuesday's turnout figures will be determined by comparing the number of voters who cast ballots with the number of registered voters. But election officials have acknowledged that current voter rolls don't reflect reality because thousands of voters who moved away after the flood remain on the list.

Under state law, a voter cannot be stricken from the rolls because of inactivity unless he or she fails to vote in all elections during a time period that includes two consecutive, regularly scheduled federal elections. In other words, no voter displaced by Katrina or Rita can be erased from the rolls until 2010, the secretary of state has said.

Orleans Parish Registrar of Voters Sandra Wilson has suggested that more than 100,000 people still on the rolls have left New Orleans and eventually may be removed.

A similar scenario is likely to play out in St. Bernard Parish, where only about one-third of 67,000 pre-Katrina residents have returned, according to the most recent census.

There, too, the standard turnout formula probably will result in artificially depressed figures, Chervenak said.

The glitch also appears to result in a strange statistical quirk.

The latest count by the secretary of state shows that more than 278,000 New Orleans residents are registered to vote in Tuesday's election. Compared with the most recent Census estimate -- dating to July 2007 -- that suggests that New Orleans has about 40,000 more registered voters than it does residents.

A similar flaw appears in St. Bernard, where the most recent census estimates and voter registration figures show more than 9,000 more voters than residents living in the coastal parish.

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