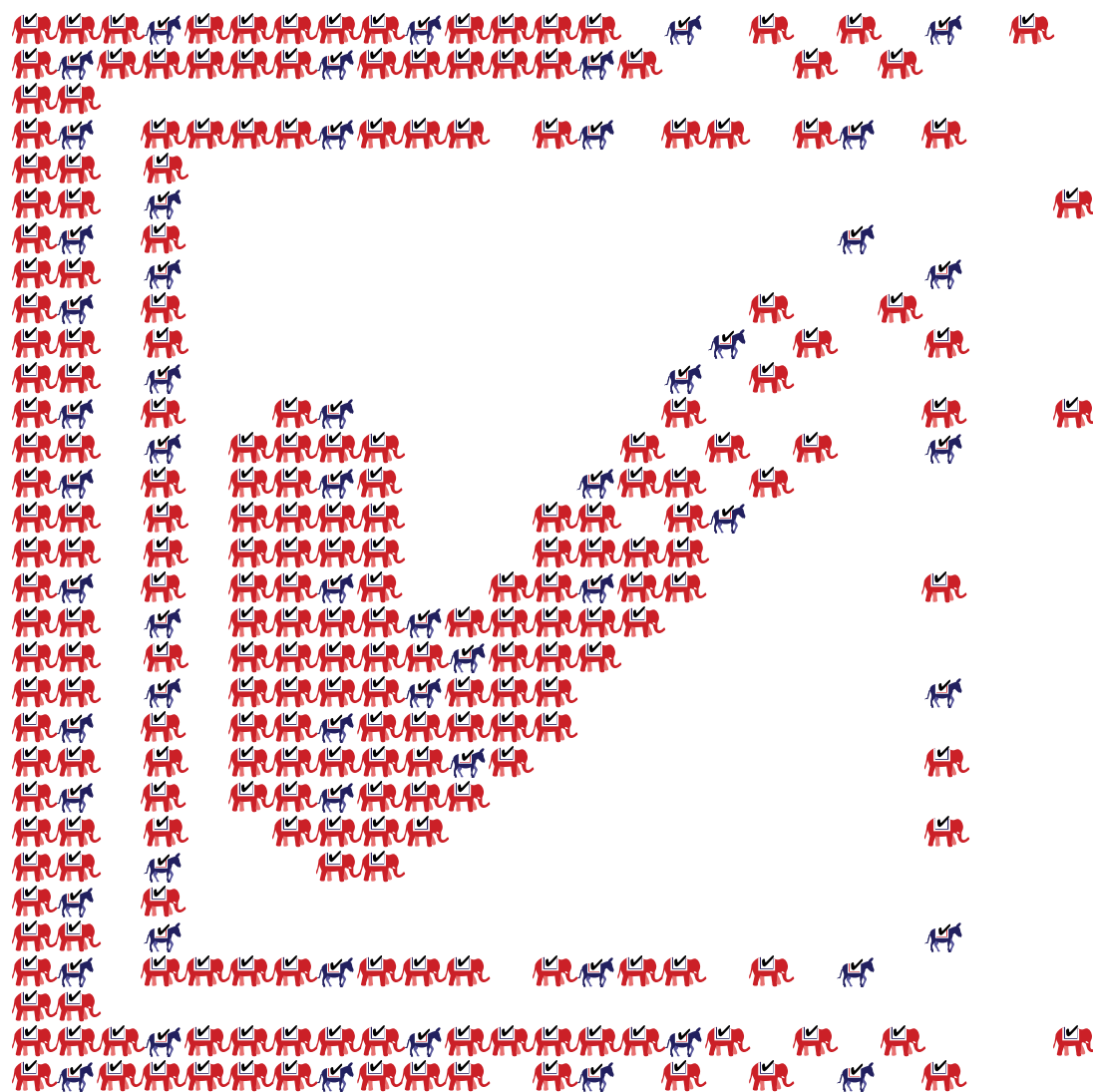




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# Utah's democracy vacation



By CHARLES BEACHAM

In 1968, Utah had the highest voter turnout in the nation with 78.6 percent of registered voters participating in that year's presidential election. In 2008, just 40 years later, the Beehive state was next to last, with only 50.5 percent of eligible citizens casting ballots.

Where once Utah was known across the nation as a model of high voter participation, it now seems polling locations have become relics of the past.

Richard Davis, professor of political science at BYU, said the main reason for low voter participation is likely because of a lack of political competition.

"In 1968, Utah was No. 1 in voter turnout," Davis said. "Since then, Utah has become a one party state."

According to the most recent party affiliation statistics, more than 699,000 Utah voters affiliated themselves with the Republican Party, while less than 164,000 voters identified themselves as Democrats.

This one-sided political environment is nothing new in Utah. In the years since 1976, Utah has only voted for Republican presidential candidates.

"It is difficult to motivate voters when they know the outcome of the election," Davis said, adding this downward trend in voting isn't necessarily national.

Many states have experienced marked increases in turnout, but Utah continues to decline. Between 2004

and 2008, Utah was one of 12 states that decreased in voter turnout.

"As most states have increased turnout in presidential elections, Utah has not," Davis said. "We may see a temporary increase in Utah in 2012 with high interest in Mitt Romney, but that won't solve the underlying problem of lack of competitiveness."

A possible cause of this one-sided party system in Utah could be the religious conservatism many associate with LDS culture. Stephen Mickelsen,

a native of Kennewick, Wash., has been a Utah resident for almost three years and is still trying to find his place in Utah's political conversation. Mickelsen said he feels lack of competition is driven by a perception that says Latter-day Saints are conservative.

"It's almost as if LDS culture, not the Church, but the culture, has perpetuated this idea that being a conservative Republican is the only way

to go," Mickelsen said. "As someone with liberal views it's easy to feel ostracized for thinking differently."

Though not affiliated with any political party, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has always encouraged its members to be active in the political process. In March, the First Presidency of the Church released a letter urging its members to attend a precinct caucus meeting of their choice.

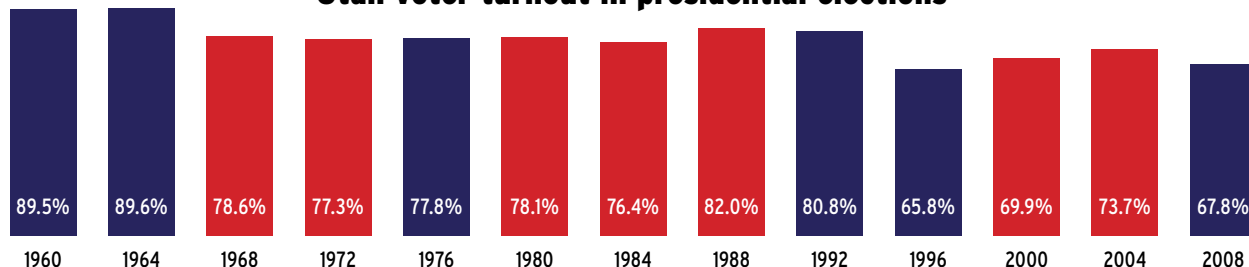
"We are concerned with the decreasing attendance at these caucus meetings in Utah in recent years," the letter read. "Principles compatible with the gospel may be found in the



"In 1968, Utah was No. 1 in voter turnout. Since then, Utah has become a one party state."

**Richard Davis**  
BYU political science professor

Utah voter turnout in presidential elections



Source: Office of the Lieutenant Governor

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# DEMOCRACY

## *Turnout at Utah polls dwindles*

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“Principles compatible with the gospel may be found in the platforms of the various political parties.”

Lack of political diversity isn't the only factor contributing to Utah's low voter turnout. Most political scientists agree young voters are the most politically inactive demographic, and the Beehive State isn't lacking in young people.

In 2010, the Census Bureau reported Utah as the youngest population in the nation. In that year, 16.5 percent of Utah's population fell between the ages of 20 and 29, with a median age of 29.2 years.

When compared with other age groups, young adults between 18 and 24 were well below the curve in turnout, falling nearly 20 percent behind voters between the ages 25 and 44. Utah citizens between 45 and 64 years of age registered at a rate of 67.7 percent. Of those who registered, 63.6 percent actually voted.

Hadley Jarvis, a senior at BYU from Alpine, was eligible to vote in the 2010 midterm election, but never registered. Jarvis said she has no plans for voting in this year's election either.

“It's not that I don't want to, or that I don't care,” Jarvis said. “I just don't know enough about what's going on.”

Jarvis isn't alone in feeling unprepared, many young voters feel they aren't equipped to make political decisions, but statistics show most simply aren't interested.

According to a U.S. Census Bureau report entitled “Voting and Registration in the

Election of November 2008,” 48.5 percent of 18 to 24 year olds who were not registered to vote reported being either disinterested in the election or in politics in general. The same report showed 21 percent of registered nonvoters said they were simply too busy.

Matthew Shaw, a junior from Helena, Mont., started studying at BYU in 2008 and said registering to vote in Utah is simply an inconvenience.

“My family lives in Montana, so that's where I claim residence,” Shaw said. “It's a hassle to have to get a new driver's license and change my permanent address every time I move.”

Whether low turnout is an issue of age, apathy, ignorance or competitiveness is unclear, but the government is taking steps to improve voter turnout.

In the 2011 municipal election, Provo had the lowest turnout in Utah County when compared with other cities that reported voter registration statistics.

Provo Mayor John Curtis said these elections are important because municipal leaders impact residents in a greater way than state and federal officers.

“We are a very civic-minded people, but it doesn't translate to voting,” Curtis said, adding the city is using several tools to improve voter turnout.

“Provo has used social media to try and spread information about voting times and locations,” Curtis said. “We have a web site that gives vot-

ing location, elected officials, precinct boundaries and other important voting information.”

In 2009, in an effort to improve turnout throughout the state, former Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. established the Governor's Commission on Strengthening Utah's Democracy. This commission, comprised of Utah politicians and public servants, was charged with studying Utah's political atmosphere and recommending initiatives that could improve voter turnout. Some of those recommendations are already being enacted.

The state has made leaps and bounds in improving the voter registration process. Citizens are now able to register to vote online at [vote.utah.gov](http://vote.utah.gov). This website makes it easy for citizens to register for absentee voting and learn more about voting in Utah.

The issue of Utah's low voter turnout will not be solved over night, it will take time and effort to encourage voters to return to the polls, but Jeremy Pope, professor of political science at BYU, said he believes lower turnout could mean voters are relatively satisfied with how the government is running.

“I don't mean that we should never worry about low turnout,” Pope said, adding low turnout is a complex issue. “High turnout is not an unambiguously good thing; low turnout is not necessarily a reason to fear for the safety of the republic.”




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**In the 2011 municipal election, Provo had the lowest turnout in Utah County, when compared with other cities that reported voter registration statistics.**

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