

## Early voting triples this time around in Montgomery

County, however, still lags in participation

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

About three times as many people in Montgomery County voted early before the general election as did prior to the September primary, mirroring traditional voting patterns.

Typically, turnout for gubernatorial elections is about three times greater than for primaries, county records indicate.

Still, Montgomery County, which typically has high voter turnout, had the fourth-lowest early-voting turnout in the state leading up to the general election.

Of the county's half-million registered voters, 26,707 — or 4.66 percent — voted before Election Day on Tuesday.

The county budgeted \$244,440 for early voting in the primary and general elections — or about \$8.90 for every vote cast.

Before the primary, only 1.3 percent of eligible voters participated in early voting. Overall, primary turnout in Montgomery County was 18.17 percent, the lowest in the state.

This is the first year that Maryland has had early voting, and Montgomery County Board of Elections spokeswoman Marjorie Roher said officials had been unsure what to expect.

Statewide, about 6.33 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots early for this year's general election.

Based on national trends, Roher said officials expected no change in the overall voter participation, but a decrease in the number of voters at the polls on Election Day.

Gail Ewing, a Democrat who served on the Montgomery County Council, says that in other states that have implemented early voting, turnout typically starts off slowly, but grows over the years.

"Next time around we'll probably have a whole lot more interest," Ewing said, adding that turnout also is likely to rise in 2012 because it will be a presidential election year.

In Montgomery County, where registered Democrats outnumber Republicans by almost 3-to-1, about 5.55 percent of Democrats voted early, and 4.16 percent of Republicans did the same.

Susan Heltemes, a member of the District 18 Democratic caucus, said she voted early before the primary and general election.

"I think you're going to see an even higher number next time," she predicted.

Democrats in her district — and statewide — pushed to get voters to turn out early, she said. Heltemes voted during an Early Vote Festival on Oct. 23 in Silver Spring.

Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) spoke during the rally, held outside an early-voting polling location.

Mark Uncapher, chairman of the Montgomery County Republican Party, said that early-voting numbers reveal a highly committed Republican base.

"We're having no problem motivating our folks," he said Monday. "Democrats are having to work a little bit harder."

Ewing said voters during this election cycle seem less energized than in past years, which she attributes to a lack of competition among local candidates.

"There are challengers with virtually no track records at all of working in the community or being in a leadership position," she said.

In the overwhelmingly Democratic county, Republican challengers are unable to match up, Ewing said.

The most competitive race may be for County Council in District 2, where Republican Robin Ficker, of Boyds, and Del. Craig L. Rice (D-Dist. 15) of Germantown, are squaring off for an open seat.

"That's a real race," Ewing said. "I would expect turnout to be high for that one."