<p>City election turnout jumped significantly in Minneapolis and St. Paul this year, reversing decades of waning voter participation.</p>

<p>Minneapolis saw 42 percent voter turnout this year – a 9-point jump from 2013. And while St. Paul’s turnout still considerably lags its western neighbor’s, it also saw a 7-point boost in eligible residents showing up to the polls.</p>

<p>These increases have broken the free fall in Twin Cities municipal voter turnout, which crashed about 20 points between 1993 and 2009.</p>

<p>“Research will consistently show that competitive races and controversial issues drive people to the polls,” said Casey Joe Carl, Minneapolis city clerk. “And you really have to be motivated in an off-year city election to turn out.”</p>

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<p>Voters were likely driven to the polls for a combination of reasons, Carl said, including write-in campaigns, competitive races for city seats, residual effects from the national political scene and an uptick in social media and other non-traditional means for campaigns to garner attention.</p>

<p>In Minneapolis, 11 percent of the roughly 106,000 ballots cast were from absentee voters either voting early or from elsewhere, which in Minnesota can be done without providing an excuse. In 2013, only 6 percent cast absentee ballots in the city’s election.</p>

<p>Lower turnout in off-year municipal elections is common across American cities (only 22 percent turned out in New York City this year). But despite the considerable increase, these Twin Cities numbers may still seem low for Minnesota, a state that <a href="http://startribune.com/x/416247753">led the nation in voter turnout in 2012 and 2016</a>.</p>

<p>And while turnout increased overall, the change was more pronounced in some wards than others.</p>

<p>Northeast Minneapolis, the University of Minnesota and Cedar-Riverside wards saw the largest percentage point increases for the city compared to 2013, even though those latter two areas, represented by Wards 2 and 6, had among the lowest average voter turnout for city elections reaching back to 1993. </p>

<p>Ward 5, representing part of Minneapolis’ North Side, had the lowest turnout of 28 percent and the smallest increase of only 4 percentage points. </p>

<p>Ward-level data for St. Paul isn’t available yet.</p>

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<p>While this is the first year in more than 20 years that St. Paul’s voter turnout has significantly increased, this is the second year in a row for Minneapolis.</p>

<p>And the differences between the cities don’t end there. </p>

<p>In 2013’s mayoral races, ranked-choice voting and an open mayoral seat in Minneapolis drew about 35 candidates into the fray while voter turnout increased by 13 percent. St. Paul, meanwhile, didn’t see a similar trend until this year, as 10 candidates vied for an open mayoral seat and voter turnout increased. </p>

<p>Even voter registration numbers show conflicting stories. In Minneapolis, the number of voter registrations by 7:00 a.m. has increased each year since 1997. In St. Paul, they’ve been much flatter and more inconsistent. </p>

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<p>Ranked-choice voting, implemented in 2006, was first used in both 2009 city elections, but turnout on both sides of the river was still only about 20 percent.</p>

<p>Since then, it’s hard to know how much ranked-choice voting has affected city voter turnout, especially when taking open seats, political climate and other factors into consideration.</p>

<p>But the clearest change introduced by ranked-choice voting is in more choices at the ballot box and less pressure on voters to choose a single candidate. A combined 13 mayoral candidates ran in the Twin Cities in 2009, 39 in 2013 and 25 this year.</p>

<p>“This year you really saw rank-choice voting in action,” Carl said, “whereas you in other years you saw normal elections that just happened to be using RCV.”</p>

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