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Voters a rare sight at some polling places

December 8, 2009 07:40 PM

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(Joanne Rathe/Globe Staff)

Stephen Steele stood in a voting booth with his 4-year-old daughter Nicole today at John Glenn Middle School in Bedford.

By Matt Viser, Andrew Ryan, Michael Rezendes, and Noah Bierman, Globe Staff

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With the clock ticking down towards the close of the polls at 8 p.m., some communities reported low voter turnout in the special primary elections for US Senate.

People breezed past community centers, gymnasiums, town halls, and other polling places without a second thought, the majority paying no mind to the race to fill the office left vacant by the late Edward M. Kennedy. Four Democrats and two Republicans are vying to face off in the general election on Jan. 19 for the first open US Senate seat in Massachusetts in 25 years.

"No one's really paying attention," said Maria Tomasia, an election official in New Bedford, which had anemic early turnout. "I'm very disappointed. I thought it would be large turnout considering it's Kennedy's seat. I thought in his honor, his memory, they'd go out in larger numbers, but they're not."

By 6 p.m., 52,653 ballots had been cast in Boston, a mark that represented less than 15 percent of the city's registered voters. The main branch of the Boston Public Library in Copley Square was typical: Several precincts vote there, but this afternoon the library was as empty as a church at midnight on New Year's Eve.

In South Boston, the same trickle of voters headed to the L Street Bathhouse, where not a single campaign worker was holding a sign for a candidate.

"Where are they?" asked Richard Key, 58, a longtime South Boston resident who rarely misses an election. "It doesn't look very good, but it's a primary."

Cambridge fared a little better, with 15.5 percent turnout by 3 p.m. At noon in Brookline, the number was approaching 12 percent. "Actually we're a little surprised that it's as good as it is," said assistant town clerk Linda Golburgh.

Other towns reported stronger turnouts. By 3:30 p.m., about 23 percent of Winchester's registered voters had gone to the polls, Town Clerk Mary Ellen Lannon said. In Framingham, a moderate turnout of 22 to 26 percent was expected by the end of the day. And in Barnstable, Kennedy's hometown, a turnout of 25 to 30 percent was expected.

The four Democrats fighting for their party's nomination are state Attorney General Martha Coakley, US Representative Michael E. Capuano, City Year cofounder Alan Khazei, and Celtics co-owner Stephen G. Pagliuca.

The winner of the Democratic race will face off in the Jan. 19 special election against the winner of today's Republican primary, state Senator Scott Brown of Wrentham or Duxbury businessman Jack E. Robinson, who appeared in their only televised debate last night on WGBH-TV.

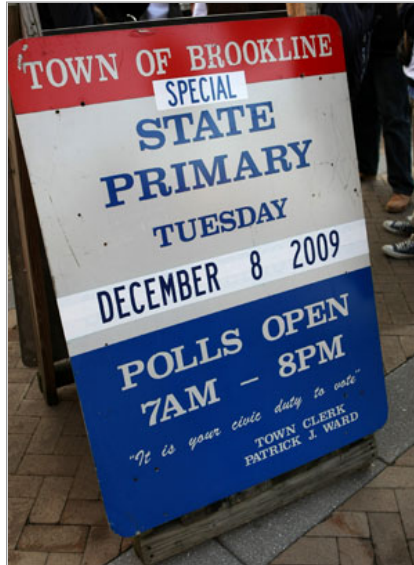
An independent candidate, Joseph L. Kennedy of Dedham, also filed sufficient signatures Monday to qualify for the special election ballot, Secretary of State William F. Galvin said.

Even with the high stakes -- a primary to nominate candidates to succeed the legendary Kennedy -- voters said they felt uninformed, as if they didn't know the candidates well enough to issue a strong opinion of the four Democrats and two Republicans.

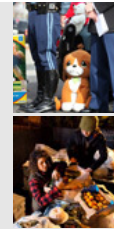
"I voted out of ignorance, I have to tell you," said Sally Lutz, a 67-year-old painter from Cambridge. "I voted how my husband and friends said they were voting. I just haven't followed it."

"I was forgetting whether the election was today or tomorrow," said her husband, Chris.

Instead, voters appeared to be making decisions along the lines that the candidates themselves have pushed.



(David L. Ryan/Globe Staff)



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Women said they were excited to vote for Coakley, who would be the first female US senator from Massachusetts. Several said they liked Khazei's background in public service – even as no one pronounced his name correctly (the most common was Karzai, like the president of Afghanistan, instead of the correct "Kay-zee").

Capuano got high marks for his feistiness, while Pagliuca made sure people knew him from a barrage of television ads.

"We felt that Capuano was perhaps the closest to us on the issues," said Chris Lutz, a 68-year-old historian from Cambridge. "We are afraid that Coakley would win if we didn't vote for Capuano."

Few voters cited any issues that drove them to the polls.

"She's got the know-how, and she's a woman – and we need more women in political offices," said Djana Marchisio, a 62-year-old model who poses in the nude for artists. "She also had one ad on television talking about getting at the fat cats and people who stole our money. I like that."

This election is the first test of a new law in Massachusetts that was passed five years ago by the state Legislature that changed the procedure for replacing a US Senate vacancy. Previously, the governor appointed a replacement, who served until the next statewide election.

The Democrat-controlled Legislature changed the law in 2004 in part to prevent the Republican governor, Mitt Romney, from making an appointment to replace Senator John F. Kerry if he won the presidency. The law now calls for a special election to be held between 145 and 160 days of a vacancy.

The law was further tweaked this year, allowing the governor to replace an interim replacement until the special election is held. Governor Deval Patrick named Paul G. Kirk Jr. to that position.

One result of having a special election – and a primary that, in this case, that falls between Thanksgiving and Christmas – is that voters who normally consider themselves informed confessed they had little clue in this election.

Officials expected turnout to be light today because of the off-season timing of the primary and a forecast of cold temperatures in the upper 30s. Galvin said turnout was "very light" and speculated that the election was drawing only people from the Democratic and Republican parties and not independents. "My instinct is that the independents are not participating," he said.

He said that he expected turnout of 500,000 to 900,000 voters out of the 4.1 million registered voters and it would be closer "to the 5 than to the 9."

To read profiles of the candidates and see where they stand on issues, [click here](#). To find out where to vote, [click here](#).


Eric Moskowitz of the Globe staff and Globe correspondents Matthew Rocheleau, Jack Nicas, and Michaela Stanelun contributed to this report.

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