In Rochester, many unheard voices in elections

Written by Brian Sharp and Jessica Alaimo Staff writers
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“By the numbers

There were 102,710 enrolled voters in the city as of Aug. 1, according to data from the Monroe County Board of Elections. Party enrollment breaks down as follows:...66,021 Democrat....11,906 unaffiliated....11,824 Republican....3,511 Independent....894 Conservative....638 Working Families....382 Green Party.Only enrolled Democrats can vote in the mayoral, City Council and school board primaries.

He took a seat by the voter registration table in the lobby of Jordan Health Center and started talking. He was 62 and a skeptic.

“All the politicians are the same,” Pablo Valli told the volunteer working the table. “Do I want to vote? No. ... Who’s going to hear me out of 10 million people in this state?”

Those of voting age are something more than that, but you get the point. Earlier, another city resident had registered for the first time. She was 52, but said she never voted because she didn’t know how to go about it. She thought she needed to be asked.

More than 60 percent of adults are not registered to vote across much of inner-city Rochester, a swatch of neighborhoods with generally higher transiency, poverty and minority populations. That is almost double the citywide average, and three times that of some suburbs. Factor in low turnout among those who are registered — turnout is worst in non-presidential elections — and one is left wondering how representative the electorate is in a city where 63 percent of the population is non-white, and 31 percent live in poverty.

“It’s really clear that people who are not voting in Monroe County, on average, are poor and minority, and so that means that voice isn’t heard,” said Barbara Grosh, voter services director with the League of...
Women Voters of Metropolitan Rochester.

Democrats head to the polls on Sept. 10, with primary elections for mayor, City Council and school board. The Democratic nominee is historically the favorite heading into November’s general election. In Rochester, enrolled Democrats outnumber all other voters 3-to-2.

The League is wrapping up a weeklong voter registration effort that is unique in its intensity and city focus.

As much as registering voters, they are batting down misconceptions. One of the bigger issues the League confronts is people thinking they can no longer vote because of a past felony conviction, Grosh said, not realizing voting rights are restored when a sentence is completed, including parole. Literacy is another issue. Knowledge of the process, attention to local politics and issues are others. If people move, they must update their information or fill out an affidavit at their current polling place.