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Voters beat the rush

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Sunday, November 2 (updated 9:33 am) By Gerald Witt Staff Writer



Holly Sizemore and her son Caleb, age 6, at the Bur-Mill Club in Greensboro on Saturday. Credit: <u>Jerry Wolford</u> / News & Record **Related Stories**

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Guilford County is poised to break a record for voter turnout on Election Day.

"Not in anyone's memory have we had anything this big," said George Gilbert, the county's elections director, predicting that 80 percent of registered voters will cast ballots in the county this year.

A total of 148,155 people cast ballots during the two-week early voting period that ended Saturday.

Add in the 115,000 voters that Gilbert expects for Election Day on Tuesday, he said, and the county's current record of 68 percent turnout from 2004 would be broken.

The big numbers this year resulted from local, state and national registration campaigns — some beginning before the highly contested May primary — to sign up new voters and get them to vote early.

More than 353,000 voters are now registered in Guilford County, a new high. That means that nearly everyone over 18 here is registered to vote, according to figures from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Now those voters also are showing up for the election. As of Friday, more than 2.5 million people had cast an early ballot in North Carolina — a turnout of 40 percent before Election Day. In Guilford County, the early turnout has been about 42 percent. Just as significant, though, is the promise of a new generation of motivated voters who registered young and voted early.

At N.C. A&T on Saturday, hip-hop artist Jay-Z and music mogul Russell Simmons campaigned for Democratic presidential nominee Sen. Barack Obama, and emphasized early voting and civic participation.

"We're seeing the vision of young people begin to shape America," Simmons told at least 1,000 students gathered on the shaded lawn around the campus fountain. Then, just before the 5 p.m. deadline for early voting, nearly 100 more people joined the line at the oncampus polling place.

All those young and new voters are likely to become a generation of politically minded people.

"Once people vote the first time, the odds go up that they'll vote a second time," said James Campbell, chairman of the political science department at the University of Buffalo and an expert on voting behavior.

"You're establishing these habits," Campbell said, "and if they don't know much about politics, they'll be more attentive to picking up what they can about politics between elections."

Politics aside, early voting provides opportunity for some voters who have trouble getting to the polls on a work day. Presidential elections are always held on a Tuesday in November.

"I had to vote this year," said Leon French, 29, of Greensboro, as he left the early voting site at Gateway University Campus. "This is the most important election since I was a kid."

He works two jobs and has a 3-month-old daughter, Aavielle, so getting out during the week is tough. Still, he wasn't about to miss

this election.

"The economy is getting worse," French said, "And my pay isn't getting better."

Now that early voting is over, the political campaigners look to Election Day.

Democrats generally focus on early voting, but Republicans often rally their voters on the weekend before an election. Both parties are expected to attract large crowds on Election Day, making a record-breaking turnout possible.

"The Drudge Report came out last night, and it's showing McCain one point ahead," Bill Wright, head of the county's Republican Party, said Saturday about his party's presidential candidate, Sen. John McCain. "We've got a lot of enthusiasm."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Contact Gerald Witt at 373-7008 or gerald.witt@news-record.com

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