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Apathy to affect polls

By Sunny Sung

VOTER turnout for the coming Municipal Council elections is expected to hit a record low.

Sources close to the Government said yesterday the territory was being swamped by a tide of political apathy.

They said the average voter turnout rate could drop below 20 percent for the first time in the territory's history.

In the Urban Council elections held in 1986 the voter turnout rate was 23.2 percent while that for the Regional Council elections was 35.9 percent.

Sources said voters were tired of going to the polls following last year's District Board and Legislative Council elections.

These were held along with the by-elections for the Tsuen Wan District Board and the Urban Council.

To make matters worse fewer candidates are standing in the elections.

More than 40 candidates contested the Regional Council elections in 1986

but only 23 are standing this time.

For the Urban Council the number of candidates has dropped from 41 to 30.

Experienced candidates said the public's response to their campaigns was cooler than in the last elections.

There were a number of hotly contested seats in the 1986 polls.

In a number of New Territories constituencies five or six candidates battled over one seat.

In the Municipal Council elections, however, no more than three candidates will be fighting it out for one seat.

But not all political commentators shared this widespread pessimism.

Dr Joseph Cheng, Senior Lecturer at the Chinese University, said that while a drop in voter numbers seemed inevitable, a rate of slightly more than 20 percent could be achieved.

He said a packed election schedule would not necessarily reduce the number of voters.



"Some people have become accustomed to elections and are not likely to be dissuaded," he said.

Also, the extensive election machinery developed by political groups in the past could help boost the turnout rate.

Three major liberal groups - Meeting Point, the Hongkong Affairs Society and the Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood - have thrown their support behind most of the liberal candidates.

In the conservative camp most candidates have received the tacit backing of the Progressive Hongkong Society.

"Candidates depend on

the experience and human resources of these political groups to mobilise the electors," Dr Cheng said.

But he agreed the efforts of the candidates and the political groups affiliated to them could be offset by other factors.

"Most political heavyweights are not standing in the elections in order to save their energy for the Legislative Council polls in 1991," Dr Cheng said.

He said voters also wouldn't pay much attention to an election where the political stars were behind the stage.

He said the turnout rate could vary greatly from constituency to constituency.

"In Tsuen Wan, where arch-rivals Chan Wai-yip and Yeung Fuk-kwong seem to be employing all means to secure a victory more electors will be attracted to cast their votes," Dr Cheng said.

"But a poor public response is expected in some areas where an uneven election battle emerges," he said.