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VOTER REGISTRATION FLAT;

PRIMARY TURNOUT LOW;

LOW TURNOUT HELD LIKELY

WASHINGTON, November 2 – Despite the likelihood of one of the closest Presidential races in American history and the certainty that it will be the most expensive, voter turnout in the 2000 Presidential election is likely to be low – perhaps but not certainly lower than the 49 percent of the eligible electorate which turned out in the 1996 election, the lowest turnout since 1924. More than 90 million eligible Americans will likely eschew the ballot box.

When final figures are in, the percentage of eligible Americans who are registered is likely to be about the same as the estimated 67 percent who were registered in 1996, Democratic registration will likely have extended its continuous downward slide which began after 1964, Republican registration will be slightly lower than in 1996 but at essentially the same level that it has been in recent years, and registration by citizens identifying themselves as independents or with third parties will again have increased, as it has in every election since 1960.

Voter turnout in the 2000 statewide non-Presidential (for U.S. Senate and/or governor) primaries was the second lowest in more than 40 years and after Labor Day, it was the lowest in more than 40 years.

These were among the principal points which emerged from a preliminary report on voter registration, based on final registration figures from 27 states and the District of Columbia; a final report on the turnout in statewide non-Presidential primaries and analysis of the factors which are likely to affect 2000 Presidential turnout by the Washington-based Committee for the Study of the American Electorate (CSAE), a non-partisan, non-profit independent research organization.

Among the report's findings:

-In this, the first year since the 1996 implementation of the National Voter Registration Act (the so-called Motor Voter Law) in which citizens, who have not cast ballots in two Federal elections and are no longer at their previous residence, can be removed from the registration rolls, the estimated percentage of those registered nationally (See Note 5) of the Voting Age Population (See Note 2) will likely, when the final registration figures are reported from all states and adjusted for the flaws in those figures, be at the same level of 67 percent as it was in 1996. When final figures are in, estimated 137, 920,000 of 205, 815,000 eligible Americans will have been registered.

-Registration in some key battleground states, most notably California, Michigan and Oregon is lower than it was in 1996.

-Based on registration figures from 13 states and the District of Columbia (of the 28 states and the District of Columbia) which register by party, estimated Democratic registration is likely to have declined for the ninth consecutive election, falling to 32.8 from 33.8 in 1996. Democratic registration has fallen 32 percent from its high of 48.2 percent of eligibles in 1964.

-Estimated Republican registration, when final figures are in and adjusted, will likely fall slightly from 25.2 in 1996 to 24.5 in 2000. Republican registration levels have fluctuated only slightly over the last four decades, but that masks a decrease in Republican registration outside of the South and a substantial increase in the South.

-Registration as independents and for third parties will likely have increased to an estimated 16.5 percent, up from 15 percent, the tenth consecutive increase. Independent registration has increased more than ten-fold from the 1.5 percent registered in 1960. Part of this increase in independent registration is due to the effect of the Motor Voter law, which makes it easier for people to register but also registers people with a lesser stake in the political process and a lesser interest in either political party.

“But, a larger part of this drift to independence is a conscious decision by citizens not to identify with either political party,” said Curtis Gans, CSAE’s director. “And this, in turn, poses the danger of further disaffection from the political process and the potential of a serious third party effort in the future.”

Turnout in the statewide non-Presidential primaries was 17.3 percent of eligibles, up slightly from the 15.5 percent which voted in 1996, but turnout in the later primaries dwindled to 14.6 percent of eligibles down from 15.9 in 1996 and the lowest in the last four decades. Turnout in these statewide primaries is down 39 percent from the 33.8 who voted in 1964.

Democratic turnout was 8.5 percent, again up slightly from the 7.7 percent voted in 1996, but September primary turnout averaged 6.3 percent, down from the 8.6 percent which voted in 1996 September primaries. Democratic turnout in these primaries has fallen 61 percent since 1964 when 22 percent voted.

Republican turnout remained in the range of normal GOP turnout, at 8.6 percent of eligibles, up slightly from the 7.7 percent which voted in 1996 but well below the high of 12.2 percent which voted in 1964.

“Many of these primaries in 2000 and in earlier years were not competitive,” Gans said, “but in earlier years citizens tended to come out to vote out of civic duty. Now that impulse has been seriously eroded.”

POTENTIAL TURNOUT ANALYZED

According to Gans, almost every indicator, save two, points to even lower turnout than in 1996, including:

- The long term trend which has seen voter turnout decline by 25 percent nationally and 30 percent outside of the south over the last 40 years has continued unabated with none of its causes addressed.

- Young citizens, aged 18-24, whose voting rates have plummeted and whose portion of the eligible electorate is slightly larger in 2000 than it was in 1996, are, if polls are any guide, even less interested in this election than in 1996.

- The South, which after the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the enfranchisement of African-Americans and the rise of two-party competition, had been increasing its rate of participation until 1996, but in both 1996 and 1998 started to decline along with the rest of the nation. Since only three states in that region – Arkansas, Florida and Tennessee – are being contested on the Presidential level, it is likely that the region's turnout will continue its decline.

- Viewership of the Presidential debates and the national conventions, when one factors in the population increase since 1996, were the lowest in history.

- Registration levels, despite the ease that the Motor Voter Law provides, are flat indicating a lack of interest in politics.

- Campaigns which have been narrowly targetted to only certain core and high voting groups have left many out of the dialogue, and the candidates have seemed unable to utter an unprogrammed, inspirational or visionary word throughout the process.

- Reputable opinion polls, most notably by the Pew Center for the People and Press, show voter interest at no higher level than in 1996.

- And the airwaves are glutted with attack and comparative ads (which is a legitimate

distinction but for the viewer often not a difference) which have the tendency to drive down turnout in the absence of an overriding issue or a polarizing figure.

Against these factors are only two which might help turnout go up – the closeness of the race (although it should be noted that two of the three closest races in the last half century Carter-Ford and Truman-Dewey had lower turnout) and the amount of money and effort which is being spent on grassroots voter mobilization among core constituency groups of both parties.

“The likelihood is that this election will not be like 1996, when every state had lower turnout,” Gans said. “Some of the battleground states, particularly those with other high profile elections – Florida, Michigan, Missouri and Washington – may have higher turnout. But since about 33 states and the District of Columbia were not targeted by the campaigns, it is likely that turnout will fall in most of these latter states.

“It is more likely that national turnout will either remain the same as 1996, despite the closeness of the election, or go down further,” Gans said, “but it would not shock me if it went up a point or two, based on late breaking voter interest not readily apparent now. I put turnout within a range of three points below 1996 to about two points above.”

TWO END NOTES

1. Since 1960, turnout has not been a predictor of election outcome. Prior to 1960, the higher the turnout the more likely a Democratic victory. But since the advent of television and the decline of sustaining party organization, particularly in the Democratic Party, Republicans stand as much chance to benefit from higher turnout and Democrats stand as much to benefit from lower percentages of voting. The critical question is who turns out, especially in what is likely to be a low turnout election. In this regard, historically, intensity of feeling about the election is a better guide to which side will win the battle of the trenches than the expanse of mobilization efforts.

2. Neither third parties nor ballot propositions breed, as a rule, higher turnout. There has been only one election in American history (1992) in which the presence of a third or fourth party candidate has produced higher turnout. Similarly, virtually all ballot propositions tend to run well behind the races for statewide or national offices on the ticket and tend to mobilize the faithful which, in a Presidential election, are already likely to vote.