

NOTE: This release comes in two parts: the first, a report and analysis of final primary returns, and the second, analysis of the general election electorate and what might be expected.

Also, this report introduces a new set of figures upon which to base the analysis of turnout. All previous reports have used the Census Bureau's estimates of Voting Age Population for November of each election year as the denominator for determining turnout and the text of this report still does. But because this denominator is flawed in several respects (see Note 2), CSAE is, in this report, and will be, in future ones, publishing figures using Dr. Walter Dean Burnham's denominators which eliminates the greatest flaw in the Census figures – non-citizens who cannot vote.

FOR RELEASE:

IMMEDIATE

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PRIMARY TURNOUT NARROWLY MISSES RECORD LOWS

INTEREST IN LATE PRIMARIES HIGHER THAN EARLY

POSSIBLE SLIGHT UPTICK IN FALL TURNOUT SEEN

WASHINGTON, September 26 – Heightened voter interest in August and September contested statewide primaries narrowly prevented national turnout in this year's primaries from falling to new record lows. But the 0.2 percentage point increase in the average turnout from the record-low 16.8 percent of the age-eligible population in 1998 who voted in that year's primaries to 17 percent this year seems hardly a cause for rejoicing.

–Fully 17 states recorded new record low turnouts for mid-term primaries. No state recorded a record high.

–Average turnout for Democratic primaries was 9.1 percent of the age-eligible population. Average turnout for Republican primaries was 7.7 percent.

–Average turnout in the 37 states which had statewide primaries was 50.6 percent below

the 34.2 percent of age-eligibles who voted in the 1966 mid-term primaries. Eleven states recorded primary turnouts more than 50 percent lower than their mid-1960's or 1970 highs. Four states – Nevada, Minnesota, Texas and Vermont had turnout levels in 2002 that were more than 60 percent lower than their mid-1960's highs.

These were among the findings of a final report on mid-term primary turnout in the 43 states which held statewide primaries (for governor or U.S. Senator) released today by the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate (CSAE), a non-partisan, non-profit research organization based in Washington. The report is based on final and official figures from all but six of these states and final and unofficial figures from the rest.

Among the other findings:

–While more states had decreases in turnout than had increases (9-8) in the later primaries (July – September), the average level of turnout increased in those primaries by 2.6 percentage points from 1998 (18.1 percent of eligibles from 15.6 in 1998), largely to due to substantial increases in the turnout in New Hampshire (up 11.1 percentage points), Tennessee (8.1), Missouri (7.3), and Wisconsin (6.3).

–This was barely enough to offset the 1.29 percentage point loss in the more populous states which held primaries before July 1. Slightly more states had increases than decreases in turnout in those earlier races (10-9) but average turnout in these races fell from 17.6 in 1998 to 16.3 in 2002.

–The average turnout level of 17 percent was the second lowest in history, eclipsed only by the 16.8 percent of age-eligibles reached in 1998.

“It is obvious that nothing has fundamentally changed in the pattern of very low voter participation in American political life,” said Curtis Gans, CSAE’s director. “The events of September 11, 2001 or the rekindling of those sentiments in 2002 may have helped boost patriotic fervor, but that did not carry over into political participation. And while primaries have never been a true indicator of political involvement, since they are for the active and interested of each political parties, the extraordinarily low level of interest evinced by the turnout rates in these primaries should be cause for concern.

“The only good news coming from these figures is that turnout was slightly up in the later primaries which may mean that voter interest is picking up for this election and there may be somewhat higher general election turnout,” Gans said.

Among some other findings:

–While turnout increases tended to be concentrated in states which had highly competitive primaries, there were some states with highly competitive primaries which experienced record low turnouts, most notably California (down 7.1 percentage points) and

Nevada (-4.5).

-While the average turnout decline from 1962-1970 highs averaged 50.6 percent in the 37 states which held primary elections in both parties, several states exceeded that decline by wide margins, including Nevada (down 67.2 percent), Minnesota (-66.1), Texas (-61.4) and Vermont (-60.4).

-Fully 17 states - Hawaii (29.5 percent of age-eligibles voting), Vermont (10.9), Rhode Island (18.2), Minnesota (12.9), Nevada (12.8), Oklahoma (21.3), Alaska (25.2), Kansas (18.2), New Mexico (18.1), Montana (21.4), Iowa (12.6), Alabama (23.3), Arkansas (18.3), West Virginia (21.2), Nebraska (16.4), Ohio (12.0) and California (17.6) - set new record lows for mid-term primary turnout.

-Democratic turnout, while increasing minimally (from 9.10 percent of age-eligibles in 1998 to 9.13 in 2002), was at record lows in 15 states, including Minnesota (6.4 percent of eligibles voting), Nevada (5.5), Alaska (7.4), Georgia (7.2), Kansas (4.4), New Mexico (11.0), New Jersey (2.8), Montana (9.7), Mississippi (2.8), Iowa (3.8), Arkansas (13.7), West Virginia (15.7), Nebraska (4.8), Ohio (5.5) and California (8.5).

-While overall turnout in Republican primaries averaged only 7.7 of age-eligibles, there were four GOP primaries which set new record highs, mostly in Southern states where the party has, due to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, become increasingly a dominant player. The new records were set in North Carolina (6.8 percent of age-eligibles voting), Georgia (8.1), South Carolina (10.1) and Missouri (10.2). Still, there were more record GOP lows (6) than highs, including Vermont (5.1), Nevada (7.3), Pennsylvania (5.8), Nebraska (11.6), Ohio (6.5) and California (8.8).

"There are three major dangers to American democracy posed by these figures," Gans said. "The first is that when you have turnout levels averaging at 9 percent for the Democrats and 7 percent for the Republicans, there is great danger that either party can be hijacked by small organized minorities having the allegiance of less than 5 percent of the electorate. Since we have created mostly safe districts for one party or another for both Congress and state legislatures, many of these primaries are tantamount to election and thus the character of either political party can be shaped by tiny minorities - which we've already seen in the rightward drift in the GOP

"The second is that with a decreasing number of people willing to identify with either political party, there is a great danger for the cohesion that is necessary in a vital democracy and the potential spectre of the splintering effects of additional parties.

"And the third, and perhaps most important problem, is that it appears that the religion of civic duty and participation has almost totally eroded. People now vote only when they feel that they have a stake in the election outcome either personally or ideologically and usually only when there is a high profile race in which their individual interests are either threatened or at issue. Americans no longer feel that their duty as citizens requires them to become informed and

participate and thus we have an electorate which is dwindling down to the self-interested and the zealous," Gans said.

The states which held primaries in both parties with the highest turnout were Wyoming (34.4 percent of age-eligibles voting), South Dakota (31.7), Hawaii (29.0), Oregon (25.9), Alaska (25.2), Tennessee (24.3) and Alabama (23.3).

The states which held primaries in both parties with the lowest turnout were New Jersey (6.2), Colorado (9.1), Texas (10.3), Vermont (10.9), Ohio (12.0), Iowa (12.6) and Nevada (12.8).

The states which held primaries in both parties with the greatest increases in turnout were New Hampshire (up 11.1 percentage points), Tennessee (8.1), Pennsylvania (7.9), Missouri (7.3), Wisconsin (6.3), Oregon (5.0), and Illinois (5.0).

The states with the largest decreases in turnout were Montana (11.4 – from their last statewide double primary in 1994), Nebraska (10.0), California (7.1), Oklahoma (5.6 – also from 1994), Minnesota (5.5), Ohio (5.0) and Vermont (4.9).

Democratic turnout was highest in Hawaii (20.2 percent of age-eligibles voting), followed by the District of Columbia (19.9), West Virginia (15.7), Massachusetts (15.2) and Rhode Island (15.0).

Democratic turnout was lowest in Mississippi (2.8), followed by New Jersey (2.8), Colorado (3.4), Idaho (3.9) and Iowa (3.8).

The greatest Democratic increases in turnout occurred in Wisconsin (up 7.7 percentage points), followed by Pennsylvania (7.7), Hawaii (7.4), Rhode Island (6.7) and Tennessee (5.1).

The largest Democratic declines were found in Montana (down 9.9 percentage points), followed by Minnesota (7.5), California (6.5), Kentucky (4.2) and Mississippi (4.2).

The highest GOP turnout was in Wyoming (24.7 percent of age-eligibles), followed by South Dakota (19.7), Alaska (16.5), New Hampshire (16.1) and Idaho (14.6).

The lowest GOP primary turnouts were found in the District of Columbia (0.7), followed by Rhode Island (3.2), New Jersey (3.4), Texas (4.0) and Arkansas (4.5).

The greatest GOP increases were recorded in South Dakota (up 10.29 percentage points), followed by New Hampshire (7.8), South Carolina (4.8), Missouri (4.3) and Oregon (4.1).

The largest GOP decreases were recorded in Hawaii (minus 8.7 percentage points), followed by Vermont (6.4), Nebraska (6.1), Alabama (3.3) and Alaska (3.0).