

FOR RELEASE:

Immediate

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, CONTACT:

Curtis Gans (202) 546-3221
(703) 478-1943

1998 TURNOUT RESUMES DOWNWARD TREND

RATE LOWEST SINCE 1942

PROBLEMS FOR BOTH MAJOR PARTIES PRESAGED

WASHINGTON, February 1 -- Contrary to more optimistic, inaccurate and misleading network election night reports, voter turnout in the 1998 mid-term election resumed its 36-year decline, falling to 36.06 percent of the eligible electorate, its lowest level since 1942.

Despite an increase of 7.5 million in the number of Americans eligible to vote and a net 5.5 million increase in the number of Americans registered (due to the first mid-term use of the National Voter Registration Act, the so-called motor voter law), the number of Americans voting fell by more than 2.5 million as compared to 1994.

Only 72,450,901 eligible Americans voted. An estimated 115,500,000 of those eligible failed to cast ballots.

This are among the findings of two reports released today by the non-partisan, Washington-based, Committee for the Study of the American Electorate: its final report on the 1998 mid-term election, based on final and official (1) registration and turnout statistics and a study of the impact of two reforms – early voting and “no-fault” absentee voting – which several states have implemented to enhance voter participation.

Among other emerging trends spotlighted in this report:

I. THE 36-YEAR DISENGAGEMENT:

The 1998 turnout rate of 36.06 percent was the lowest since 1942, when 35.7 percent of eligibles voted and millions of Americans were outside the nation fighting a war. The 1998 rate represents a drop of 26 percent from the post-womens' suffrage high of 48.6 percent in 1966. In only two elections in this period (the 1982 recession election and the 1994 angry anti-Clinton election) has turnout gone up. The turnout in this election is a decline of 2.7 percentage points since 1994 when 38.79 percent of the electorate voted (or nearly 6 million votes, had the rate remained the same).

The turnout rate outside of the South was 38.48, more than 28 percent lower than the 53.62 percent of eligibles who voted in 1966 and approaching, but not, as earlier reported by CSAE, establishing the lowest turnout since 1818. Southern turnout dropped 3.55 percentage points to 30.48, a larger drop than the rest of the nation and the second straight election (the other 1996) in which Southern turnout has declined. This tends to indicate that the South, whose turnout rise, since the 1965 enactment of the Voting Rights Act and the establishment of real two-party competition, had been holding participation rates from falling even further, is joining the trend to declining turnout and will likely no longer mitigate and may exacerbate the national turnout decline.

First time voters, those aged 18-19, will likely have voted in 1998, when Census(2) data becomes available, at an 11 percent rate; those 18-24 at a 15 percent rate. This represents a continuation of a decline in youth participation, interrupted only by the 1992 election, since the enfranchisement of 18-20 year-olds in 1971, a decline paralleled by an almost equal decline among those aged 25-34, the age when young people formerly were expected to engage in the political process. In recent elections, and with the exception of the significant one-time increase in turnout in 1992, only citizens aged 65 and over have been maintaining their rate of participation.

The landmark low turnout - the lowest since 1942, follows a Presidential election in 1996 in which citizens voted at the lowest rate since 1924 and the second lowest since 1824 and, outside the south, the lowest rate since 1824. It follows a statewide primary season with the lowest turnout in history. According to a 1997 study by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, a Swedish-based organization, the turnout rate of the United States stood at 139th among 163 democracies, lower than any advanced democracy and most fledgling democracies. That ranking is likely to be lowered as a result of the 1998 election.

“We may be experiencing the longest peacetime economic expansion with low unemployment and inflation, a declining crime rate and reduced pollution,” said Curtis Gans, CSAE’s director, “but if some aspects of our society are in good shape, it is clear that our politics and the willingness of the American people to engage in it are not. We cannot continue to set new records for non-participation, we cannot have succeeding generations dropping out of the political system, we cannot reduce the rolls of those who are participating to those with narrow interests in policy outcomes and the ideologically zealous without doing long-term damage to both the political system and governance.”

II. THE MESSAGES OF A LARGELY MESSAGELESS ELECTION:

With the exception of three factors, the results of the 1998 election did not speak to the issue of impeachment. It is clear that the media campaign on the impeachment issue mounted in the last 10 days by former House speaker Newt Gingrich and others in the GOP leadership failed to mobilize. It is clear that the impeachment question was central to the selective (with respect to states and contests) but selectively effective last month grassroots mobilization of African-Americans. And it is likely that the President’s conduct in the aftermath of the January 1997 revelations did not help the already eroding public faith in leadership and the process. But because both parties, until the last 10 days, largely avoided the issue and most Americans did not, according to polls, cast their vote on the impeachment issue, no message on that issue emerged from the electoral results.

Other messages did.

1. The defeat of the socially conservative right: In the names of Fob James, Robert(?) Inglis(?), Lauch Faircloth, Mark Neumann, James Ross Lightfoot, Linda Smith and Dan Lundgren and with the single exception of Sen. James Fitzgerald (running against a largely doomed candidate), all Republicans from the social conservative wing of the GOP in competitive statewide races lost, indicating that the advocacy based on hostility to government, opposition to abortion and flag burning, for prayer in the schools and similar nostrums may not be able to provide the votes for electoral victory beyond districts that are already drawn to insure Republican success. One of the results of declining turnout is that social conservative Republicans, whose outlook is both legitimate but representing only a small minority of Americans, have been able to gain a disproportionate share of power within the GOP due to their intense, active and loyal following and the decline in participation of others. But the results of this election as well as the adverse reaction to the nostrums contained in the November 1995 continuing resolution which shut down the federal government over issues around which the GOP had not been elected; the re-emergence of

those issues in the 1996 disaster relief bill and the subsequent substantial defeat for the GOP in the 1996 general election, tends to indicate that the more extreme versions of social and politically conservative advocacy are not a winning formula for the party.

The other major message was the election of independent Reform candidate Jesse Ventura against two well-known, highly qualified and respected candidates of the two major parties with an accompanying voter turnout nearly 10 percentage points higher than the votes cast in the next nearest state. The Ventura election, coupled with several other developments to be noted below, is an indication that the dissatisfaction with the performance of the two major parties may indicate, not only what has been growingly evident for three decades, the increasing disinclination of citizens to make a choice among the lesser of evils, but that, when offered a credible choice, the citizenry may be moving to declare a pox on the houses of both Democrats and Republicans.

III. THE PARTIES' PROBLEMS:

NOTES AND SUMMARY CHARTS

This report is CSAE's final post-election report and includes data on final and official (with some caveats, see below) turnout in the 1998 mid-term election and registration in the 1998 general election based on final and official registration figures from the states which have completed certifying their registration. It also includes a study of the impact of two reforms adopted by many states -- early voting and non-fault absentee voting -- on turnout.

It should be noted that in all of these reports turnout is arrived at by dividing those who voted by the population eligible to vote, NOT by those registered. For whatever the flaws (noted below) in the eligible vote (Voting Age Population) figures provided by the Census and minor anomalies in the vote count (also noted below), this gauge is by far more reliable and consistent than registration. Using registration as a denominator leaves out those who both did not register and did not vote (and, in the case of North Dakota, which has no registration, would leave out a whole state). Registration as a denominator has no consistency, since it fluctuates by changes in registration law and procedure. (A major change, such as the implementation of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 -- the so-called motor voter law -- can show dramatic increases in registration and thus exaggerate decreases in turnout.) Registration lists are inflated by those who have either died or moved but remain on the lists because those lists have not been recently cleaned. This might not be a problem if each state had consistent list cleaning procedures with regard to frequency and timing, but they don't. Thus, there is no way of measuring the degree of distortion in individual states. And because of certain provisions in the motor voter law (noted below), state official registration statistics are more inaccurate than they have ever been.

The following are some notes relating to the figures which have been compiled and the deficiencies in those figures.

1. Voting Age Population:

The most widely used denominator for determining the percentage of eligible Americans who vote is the Census Bureau's early election year estimate of age-eligible population in that election year. (To determine turnout on a consistent basis, that number is divided into the Presidential vote in Presidential election years, and, in mid-term election years, into the votes cast for that statewide office which draws the highest vote -- or in the absence of a statewide contest, aggregate vote for all Congressional elections in a state.) While the Census estimate of age-eligible voters (Voting Age Population or VAP) is both the number used for analysis by most reputable sources and the only number that provides a constant denominator through the history of

the United States, this number is flawed in a number of respects: it includes aliens, convicted felons and people deemed incompetent in mental institutions who cannot vote, and it does not include age-eligible American citizens living outside the United States who can vote. It also does not make accommodations for at least two other factors: it does not factor in the undercount in the decennial Census (see registration notes below), and it counts those in the military at their bases in the several states, although many cast their ballots in the state of their home residence. This figure is used, despite these limitations, because it is one of only two sets of denominators which offer a degree of consistency over time (similar methodology) and thus can be used for historical analysis purposes.

The other denominator, not in common use but a better one, is that developed by Dr. Walter Dean Burnham of the University of Texas which provides a citizen-age eligible population -- one in which the aliens (the largest source of distortion of the Census figures) are removed. Burnham has a data set going back to 1824 for a denominator of eligible population and, since 1870 (the first decennial Census to estimate aliens), that data set attempts through interpolation to exclude aliens. At some future point, funds making that possible, CSAE hopes to provide analysis using both Census and Burnham's figures. But while it should be noted that using Burnham's figures, turnout in 1996 was 51.9 percent (as compared to 49 percent using VAP), the national and individual state trend lines are quite similar -- at a remove of about 3 percentage points higher in Burnham's figures. It should be noted that in certain states with high concentration of aliens -- e.g. California and Texas -- actual turnout percentages could be two to three percentage points higher than those reported here.

For 1998, the Census estimated voting age population is 200.9 million. The estimated number of undocumented and documented resident aliens is 14.02 million. There are between 3-4 million convicted felons in prison; in some states, even after serving their time these felons remain stripped of their voting rights. There are between 3-4 million Americans living outside the United States who can vote but are not counted as eligible in the Census estimate. In addition, there are an indeterminate but relatively small number of people in mental institutions and deemed incompetent who are not included in the 200.9 estimate and there are a presently indeterminate but relatively small number of aliens who have gained citizenship this year, who would reduce the alien estimate.

(Note: CSAE's estimate of non-voters in 1998 is based on Census' national age-eligible estimate, minus the 14 million aliens who could not vote.)

2. Voting Figures:

Voting figures for 1998 used in this report are final, official and certified by the chief election officers of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. (Note that the votes for Hawaii are not certified for the election which drew the highest turnout -- the gubernatorial race, but the changes from the figures in this report are likely to be minimal.) Votes from previous years are final and official, provided by the chief election officials of the several states and the District of Columbia and compared with America Votes, a biennial compilation of election statistics published by Congressional Quarterly Press.

It also should be noted that the basis for determining turnout in any individual state is the number of votes cast for the statewide race which draws the highest turnout and, in the six states (Delaware, Mississippi, Montana, New Jersey, Virginia and West Virginia) which did not have statewide races in 1998, by aggregate vote for Congress. There are some who go to the polls but do not cast a ballot for the race used as basis for analysis. In the back of this report there is a chart showing the total ballots cast in the 32 states which compile these figures, and how much that vote differs (1.22 percentage points) from the ballots cast for the race which received the highest vote tally. It should be noted that in Alaska, the largest vote was for the Congressional seat and that in both Alaska (gay marriages) and Washington (minimum wage), there was a ballot proposition (both of which won) whose vote tallies slightly exceeded the votes for any individual office.

Partisan turnout is determined by votes for House of Representatives. This year, however, these figures are likely to overstate the Democratic percentage and understate the Republican percentage. There were more than 90 uncontested races, and the states of Arkansas, Florida and Louisiana chose not to either count or, in the case of Florida, put on the ballot those House races which were uncontested.

It also should be noted that, in providing charts on regional performance, Texas is included in this analysis both as a state of the South and of the Southwest.

(Note: Because six states -- Delaware, Mississippi, Montana, New Jersey, Virginia and West Virginia -- had no statewide races at the top of the ticket in 1998, their declines are exaggerated as compared to states where comparable races exist. Similarly, for the three states which did not have statewide races in 1994 -- Kentucky, Louisiana and North Carolina -- their increases this year overstate the increased level of voting.)

3. Registration Figures:

(NOTE: THE 1998 OFFICIAL REGISTRATION FIGURES USED IN THE CHARTS IN THE BACK OF THIS REPORT ARE OFFERED FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY. FOR REASONS DISCUSSED BELOW, THESE FIGURES ARE VIRTUALLY UNUSABLE, EXCEPT AS A BASIS FOR EXTRAPOLATING ESTIMATES.)

Registration figures used in this report are final and official and provided by the chief election officials in the several states and the District of Columbia. The Committee only uses figures at the close of each registration cycle each biennium, believing those are the only ones which are comparable. Registration figures are not available for North Dakota (which does not have registration), Wisconsin (which does not compile them on a statewide basis) and Mississippi (which is moving to a new and more accurate system of determining actual registrants but had not completed that process at the time of this report). Before the early 1980's Ohio and Mississippi did not compile statewide figures and long-term partisan historical figures are not available for several states which have current figures.

Accurate registration numbers have always been difficult to ascertain, made now more difficult by provisions of the National Voter Registration Act (the motor voter law). The registration statistics contained in the back of this report are badly flawed because they contain the names of substantial numbers of citizens who have died or moved. In previous years, it was possible, after study, to estimate that the degree of distortion of registration numbers was approximately 10 percent nationally -- although there would be wide variations on an individual state basis pending the frequency, timing and thoroughness of their list cleaning procedures.

In the past, CSAE presented both gross registration numbers nationally and a figure for adjusted registration based on a ten percent deflation.

Three aspects of the Motor Voter Law have made this estimation obsolete:

--A provision in the law which prohibits election officials from removing the names of those who have changed residences from the lists until two federal elections have intervened. With mobility rates running about 16 percent a year, this means that an individual list, after three plus years before names could be removed, could be distorted by as much as 60 percent.

--A provision which makes it illegal for election officials to initiate any proceeding which might lead to removing a citizen from the list or placing him or her on an inactive list within 90 days before an election.

--A ruling by the Justice Department that prohibits non-voting from being used as a trigger for initiating list cleaning procedures -- such as mailings or computer matches with change of address files -- to ascertain whether a citizen is still residing where he or she is listed on the registration rolls. While the law rightly forbids removing a citizen from the rolls for exercising his or her right not to vote, this ruling forces states to double the effort and cost of list cleaning procedures and thus makes it less likely that such list cleaning will be undertaken at any greater frequency than mandated by the law.

While states are not permitted to actually purge citizens from their voting lists if they have moved until two federal elections have elapsed, they are mandated to provide the Federal Election Commission with an inactive list of voters -- voters who would ordinarily be purged but are kept on the list by law -- by March of the year following each Federal election.

Those lists are instructive. In interviews between CSAE and the election offices, election officials indicated that their inactive list essentially represented the names that would have been removed prior to the motor voter law.

Thus, a realistic national picture of registration is derived by ascertaining the gross registration, subtracting the inactive list and multiplying the resulting total by 0.9 (to account for the normal inflation of national registration in any given election year.)

On the next two pages are charts which shows the difference between registration percentages based on official statistics and the adjusted figure subtracting those on the inactive list. At the time of this release, there were 22 states which had compiled their inactive lists, sufficient to make a realistic correction to the gross registration figures at the back of this report. Only four states had lists of inactives by partisan registration, sufficient to be instructive rather than determinative.

Thus, all the official registration statistics at the end of this report should be discounted. CSAE has made an estimate of national registration in this report and an estimate of turnout as a function of registration, based on these charts, but while the estimate is as good as any, it is not definitive. The Federal Election Commission, in fulfilling its oversight function for Congress, will emerge with a more accurate estimate when all states report their inactive lists as they are required to do by the end of March 1999. Similarly, with no full assurance of accuracy, CSAE has made an estimate of partisan registration this year for the total of those states which register by party, but while there will be a full corrective to the tentativeness of the figures on overall registration when all states have completed their inactive lists, there may be only one or two more states which will have an inactive list by party.

It should also be noted that Alaska has a reported registration rate in excess of its eligible vote. There are two possible causes for this: a. the Census may have underestimated population in those states; or b. the states have not sufficiently cleansed their lists of those who have died or moved to present an accurate picture of true registration. Both factors could be responsible for this picture.

4. REGISTRATION LAW STUDY:

Because several states, in the hope of increasing turnout, have moved to adopt changes in election procedures designed to make it easier for citizens to cast their ballots, CSAE chose to analysis the turnout performances of states which adopted either or both of two such reforms: a. early voting whereby citizens can, for a given period before an election (17-21), cast ballots at designated and convenient sites in their localities; and b. no-fault absentee voting, whereby citizens can, without giving a reason, apply for, receive and cast an absentee ballot by mail at any point during a 17-21 day period prior to the election. In at least one state, a citizen can be placed on a permanent absentee list and be sent an absentee ballot in each election.

In this analysis, CSAE has used both Presidential and mid-term elections (in separate charts). At the top of each chart are the states which have adopted one or both of these procedures, the votes and percentage of eligible votes cast in the last three elections and the percentage increases or decreases between those elections. At the bottom, similarly analyzed are states which have not adopted those procedures. There are several of these charts, some showing states which have adopted these procedures during the period of analysis and showing their performance both before and after the adopting of those procedures.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

CSAE would like to again acknowledge the assistance that Dr. Walter Dean Burnham has given in each of its major reports in providing historical context to the figures it analyzes.

CSAE would like to thank the Associated Press and the various state and local election offices for their continuing help with CSAE's research.

The statistical analysis in this report and previous CSAE reports has been made possible through a custom database program developed for CSAE by Gary Corbin and Laura Lee Guimond.

Data for this report was gathered by CSAE Research Associate Joel Wolf with assistance from Research Associate Emeritus Samuel Schreiber.

All analysis in this study was done by Curtis Gans, CSAE's director, who is solely responsible for any screw-ups.

* * *

Note: that while the top of some charts indicate that comparisons are between 1962 and 1998, in the interests of saving both paper and printing costs, the page containing only 1962 is not part of this report. CSAE will be glad to provide it.

SUMMARY CHARTS**I. 1998 TURNOUT:**

VAP	VOTED	PCT.	NON-VOTERS
200,929,000	72,450,901	36.06	119,500,000 (est.)

II. TURNOUT TREND: Percentage of eligible citizens who voted in each election for either the statewide race engendering the highest turnout or the total Congressional vote in those states which did not have a statewide race:

YEAR	PERCENTAGE VOTED
1998	36.06
1994	38.79
1990	36.53
1986	36.42
1982	40.09
1978	37.77
1974	38.78
1970	46.78
1966	48.61
1962	47.57

III. PARTISAN TURNOUT TREND: Party share of eligible vote based on turnout for races for the U.S. House of Representatives:

YEAR	DEMOCRATS	REPUBLICANS	OTHER
1998	15.72	16.00	1.16
1994	16.60	19.02	1.00
1990	17.87	15.14	0.81
1986	18.51	14.97	0.35
1982	21.03	16.43	0.62
1978	18.75	15.71	0.57
1974	20.66	14.55	0.75
1970	22.70	19.69	0.77
1966	23.17	21.98	0.53
1962	23.73	21.92	0.35

IV. PARTISAN TURNOUT TREND FOR SELECTED REGIONS: Partisan turnout as a percentage of eligible vote based on votes cast for U.S. House of Representatives for selected regions as opposed to the rest of the nation:

YEAR	PARTY		PARTY	
	DEMOCRATIC		REPUBLICAN	
	SOUTH	NON-SOUTH	SOUTH	NON-SOUTH
1998	10.34	18.24	12.52	17.63
1994	13.48	18.03	17.07	19.91
1990	15.77	18.80	11.89	16.58
1986	16.35	19.45	10.87	16.76
1982	17.26	22.64	11.07	18.72
1978	14.26	20.58	10.12	17.97
1974	14.74	22.96	8.47	16.91
1970	18.48	24.27	9.95	23.31

1966	18.53	24.86	10.27	26.23
1962	15.71	26.58	9.27	26.22
	WEST	NON-WEST	WEST	NON-WEST
1998	18.52	15.17	15.56	16.09
1994	18.33	16.26	18.45	19.14
1990	17.90	17.86	15.48	15.07
1986	19.99	18.24	17.05	14.59
1982	21.90	20.88	19.71	15.87
1978	21.34	18.32	17.57	15.40
1974	23.33	20.23	16.27	14.28
1970	26.35	22.13	23.37	19.11
1966	26.43	22.69	28.38	21.02
1962	26.59	23.63	25.47	21.40

V. REGISTRATION TREND: Registration rate as a percentage of eligible vote (VAP) estimated for the nation based on official registration, adjusted for deadwood on the rolls and the strictures of the motor voter law. (Note: North Dakota has no registration, Wisconsin does not compile statewide figures and Mississippi is adjusting to a new registration counting system and has not reported as of this report.) In each case these percentages are estimates, based on downward adjustments of 10 percent (in all other years except for 1998) account for those names which have not been removed from the rolls, but who have died or moved and, in 1998, also for those placed on inactive lists who would have been purged from the lists.

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>PERCENTAGE OF VAP REGISTERED</u>
1998	64.6 (est.)
1994	61.8
1990	60.0

1986	61.2
1982	60.0
1978	60.1
1974	61.6
1970	64.9
1966	66.0
1962	64.2

VI. PARTISAN REGISTRATION TREND: Registration by major party and other (those registering independent and for third parties) for those states (24) and the District of Columbia as a percentage of eligible and in previous years which register by party, using unadjusted registration figures except insofar as the 1998 estimate attempts to deal with the distortions caused by the motor voter law. This estimate does attempt to place the partisan registration within the limits of the overall registration estimate for the nation:

YEAR	DEMOCRATS	REPUBLICAN	OTHER
1998	29.5 (est.)	22.0 (est.)	13.0 (est.)
1994	32.13	22.68	11.69
1990	33.59	23.07	8.27
1986	35.83	22.30	8.08
1982	36.48	20.57	6.36
1978	38.25	20.08	5.88
1974	38.94	21.75	4.81
1970	41.29	25.05	3.51
1966	45.17	24.79	2.71
1962	44.97	25.26	1.62

VII. PARTISAN SOUTHERN AND NON-SOUTHERN REGISTRATION TREND: Partisan registration (unadjusted for inflation) as percentage of

eligible vote for both parties:

YEAR	PARTY		PARTY	
	DEMOCRATIC		REPUBLICAN	
	SOUTH	NON-SOUTH	SOUTH	NON-SOUTH
1998	37.0 (est.)	30.0 (est.)	25.0 (est.)	22.5 (est.)
1994	37.84	30.43	22.42	22.75
1990	39.09	31.41	21.00	23.89
1986	42.89	33.03	19.18	23.53
1982	43.36	33.38	15.84	22.71
1978	45.89	35.31	14.84	22.52
1974	46.89	35.31	15.26	24.70
1970	51.54	37.32	14.06	29.31
1966	55.66	40.92	12.02	29.98
1962	53.75	42.56	11.82	28.97