

# It's Bruce Who Got the Turnout Story Wrong

By Curtis Gans

What did you want to know 36 hours after the 1996 election: the exact number of total ballots cast in the state of Colorado—a figure not available for ten months after the election—or that voter turnout in 1996 was the lowest in 72 years?

What did you want to learn from the fragmentary results available in the 72 hours following Election Day: the exact vote cast for president in New York—unavailable for about a month—or that New York was one of more than 14 states which had its lowest turnout in history?

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Should reputable sources and the media remain silent on the issue of turnout and the growing crisis of American democracy in the immediate aftermath of the election because the available data are not optimal, or use the data, adequately qualified, to draw some conclusions?

These are but some of the questions that Peter Bruce's essay provokes. What else can be said of that essay:

That, in his desire to debunk “the experts”—to attempt to show that national turnout in 1996 was substantially higher than reported and that 1988 rather than 1996 had the lowest turnout since 1924—he ignores both important data and the need for an historically-consistent methodology. Thus his analysis is inadequate and inaccurate.

That, in his preoccupation with the vote undercount in certain states—in the only data immediately available after the election—he commits the same methodological errors he does with national figures and loses sight of the forest of meaning for the trees of individual figures.

That, in his critique of the 1996 post-election report of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate (CSAE), he makes serious errors which render his critique suspect.

## The National Data: Ignoring History and What Won't Fit

In a presidential year and in common practice, one arrives at an historically consistent voter-turnout percentage by dividing the number of votes cast for president by the number of Americans who are eligible to vote. Bruce quarrels with both the numerators and denominators currently in use.

For a numerator Bruce would rather use a figure of total ballots cast (those who voted for president plus those who cast a ballot but didn't vote for president). But, since only 36 states compiled such figures in 1996 (and fewer than that in the past), Bruce

acknowledges that presidential vote is perhaps the only consistent way to analyze turnout over time.<sup>1</sup>

His larger quarrel is with the most commonly used denominator—the Census Bureau's early election year projection of November age-eligible population (VAP). This is a flawed figure (as CSAE details in each of its reports) because it includes as eligible: aliens, convicted felons (often but not universally denied the vote), and people in mental institutions judged incompetent who cannot vote. VAP, however, does not include age-eligible citizens residing abroad who can vote.<sup>2</sup>

Bruce seeks a more accurate denominator for determining turnout by reducing the 1996 VAP estimate of 196.5 million age-eligible voters by an estimated 14.6 million ineligible aliens and 2.78 million convicted felons—arriving at a revised denominator of 179.1 million.

The problem is that he ignores three factors—naturalization, age-eligible citizens living abroad, and the Census undercount—which would push his 179.1 million figure upward.

*Naturalization:* Because of California's 1994 immigration proposition, the 1995 federal immigration law, and, perhaps, the Clinton Administration's zeal to add as many Latinos as possible to the eligible-voter list, 1.1 million aliens were naturalized in 1996, about 757,000 more than the average of 290,000 naturalized aliens in each of the three years prior to 1994.<sup>3</sup>

*Age-Eligible Citizens Residing Outside of the United States:* A reasonable estimate of age-eligible citizens residing outside the US and not included in the 1996 VAP estimate, based on figures provided by the Defense Department, the Bureau of Consular Affairs, and the Office of Personnel Management, is 2.8 million.<sup>4</sup>

*Census Undercount:* The Census' VAP estimates are based on interpolation from the decennial Census. The

**Table 1**  
**Turnout in 1996, and 1996 v. 1992 Turnout Compared:**  
**Using Final, Official Presidential Vote As the Numerator**

Jurisdiction	Denominator equals voting-age population			Denominator equals Burnham's estimate of VAP holding citizenship		
	1996	1992	Difference	1996	1992	Difference
Nation	49	55	6	51	57	6
Arizona	45	54	9	47	55	8
California	43	496	6	48	54	6
Florida	48	50	2	52	55	2
New Mexico	46	52	6	47	52	5
New York	47	51	4	49	54	4
Oregon	58	66	8	59	67	9
Texas	41	49	8	43	51	8
Washington	55	60	5	57	63	6

1990 Census contained, according to two Census Bureau estimates, a 1.6% undercount of the population. In terms of age-eligible, potentially-voting citizens, this means that the VAP is understated by 2.9 million.<sup>5</sup>

These three figures (757,000, 2.8 million, and 2.9 million or 6.5 million total) should be added to Bruce's adjusted VAP to produce a comparatively true voting-age population of about 185.6 million.<sup>6</sup> Using this figure and the 96.3 million votes cast for president, 1996 voter turnout was 51.8% of eligibles (and not the 53.7% Bruce calculates). Based on a good faith estimate of total ballots cast, turnout was 52.8% (and not the 54.5% Bruce asserts). And the number of non-voters, based on votes for president, was 89.3 million; 88 million if one factors in total ballots cast (and not the 82 million Bruce claims).

But what use are these figures? We have arrived at a better estimate of 1996 turnout and non-voting, but there is no other election, save 1992, for which comparable statistics could be created using anything resembling the same methodology. Total ballots cast are kept by only some states, fewer in past years than at present and none at all beyond a certain point in history. Aliens are calculated by one method now (partially using survey data), but by interpolation from the decennial census in other years. Even now there is no fully accurate figure for the number of convicted felons (and former convicted felons who have served their terms) who can and cannot vote, and there are most certainly no such figures historically. Finding an historically-consistent figure for age-eligible citi-

zens abroad, allocating them by state or for the degree of under or overcount in any particular census would lead nowhere.

There are, in fact, only three databases with consistent methodologies for the determination of turnout over time. For the numerator, votes cast for president is the only one. For the denominator, there are two: the Census VAP estimates (with all their flaws) which are based on interpolation of data from the decennial censi; and, perhaps a better one developed by Walter Dean Burnham, which through 1870 (the first year in which the Census recorded data on aliens) attempts to calculate out the alien population from both national and state age-eligible population figures, thus creating a "citizen, age-eligible vote."<sup>7</sup>

But while CSAE believes the Burnham denominator is better, and says so in its reports, it is not the one in common use. The clerk of the House of Representatives, the Congressional Research Service, the Federal Election Commission, Election Data Services, *Congressional Quarterly* (which publishes *America Votes*, a biennial compilation of election data), and the entire media corps use the VAP standard.

But whether one uses VAP or Burnham, turnout for president in the 1996 election was either 48.99% (of VAP) or 51.9% (Burnham). Both figures are (relative to their databases) the lowest turnout since 1924 and the second lowest since 1824.<sup>8</sup> Which is to say Bruce's methodology is inadequate, his absolute numbers are overstated, and his conclusions are wrong.



## The Turnout Muddle

### The State Data

Bruce takes his greatest umbrage at the vote totals and percentages for individual states published immediately after the election and falls, by virtue of that umbrage, into perhaps a larger set of errors. Each election year CSAE and other outlets provide what is advertised as preliminary guidance on turnout trends within 72 hours after the election, using the Census' VAP as a denominator and the unofficial vote for president as reported by the Associated Press and the Voter News Service (VNS) in their release of these statistics at 4 pm (EST) the day following the election as the numerator. These figures were heavily qualified in 1996 by CSAE and other reputable sources as being unofficial and as awaiting substantial numbers of additional votes, especially with respect to absentee ballots in the West.<sup>9</sup> And, while the figures are flawed, they serve as a useful basis of providing analysis of the turnout component of each biennial election.

Bruce argues that the release of these figures does a disservice because they, in his view, grossly underestimate the final turnout percentages for some states and that this underestimation may undercut serious research on aspects of the election process such as changes in state registration and election laws.

First, the data—the unofficial Associated Press/VNS tabulated vote—released and analyzed are the *only data* available within the 72-hour period after the election, after which political journalists go on vacation and their outlets cease covering the election.

Furthermore, Bruce arrives at his distorted findings by mishandling the data himself. He increases the numerator of presidential vote by using total ballots cast (which are not available, in some cases for up to nine months after the election, not kept by all states, and not kept by the same number of states over time). He also reduces the denominator of eligible voters by (1) deducting the number of aliens (available, but by

differing methodologies over the years); (2) deducting the number of convicted felons in each state (a number which does not show how many can or cannot vote, does not offer the number of former felons who can or cannot vote and is, in any event, a figure that cannot be replicated over time); and, (3) ignoring factors that would increase the denominator such as an unusually high number of 1996 naturalizations, the Census undercount, and Americans residing abroad who can vote and do, both for president and in their individual states.<sup>10</sup> Bruce's result is, by virtue of an inadequate methodology, both wrong and unreplicable. That no reputable scholar

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I know of uses these preliminary figures to assess changes in registration and voting law. They wait, as I do, for final and official figures.

Foolish consistency may be the hobgoblin of small minds. But consistency and comparability are the only way that students and scholars of voting behavior can do longitudinal research. I know of no serious scholar in the field of election data who does not strive for such consistency (with admittedly inadequate figures) to provide historical perspective. They (we) do not compare turnout in mid-term elections with turnout in presidential elections (except to note similar trends). And they (we) seek to find a common basis for understand-

ing what has been happening in American politics, which can only be seen over time and through the prism of a consistent set of figures.

What would Bruce do about the problems he finds? He would have no one report anything about turnout until accurate final figures were known (up to four weeks later for president and nine months later for total ballots), and he would encourage the states to speed up their count of the vote (see *Public Perspective*, pp. 39-43). Does he really believe that the media would remain silent on the issue of turnout until superior figures are available? And does he really believe any serious person disseminating conclusions about turnout should not provide raw data upon which those conclusions are based? The reader can judge which is more important in the 36 hours after the election—an unavailable pristine figure for individual state turnout or some accurate historical insight.

The larger question raised is whether in the immediate aftermath of the election one should draw conclusions about turnout from flawed figures or await more pristine results. Based on the only available data in the immediate aftermath of the election, it was possible to show: (1) turnout was the lowest since 1924; (2) the 36-year slide in turnout is the longest in American history and, outside of the South, the largest; (3) several states set new records for low turnout; and, (4) the turnout decrease was the largest single decline since 1920. It also could be shown that all of this occurred despite a substantial increase in registrations, liberalized registration and voting laws, increased education and decreased mobility, and enhanced competition—all of which should have had an upward push on turnout. All this bespoke an American democracy in progressively greater disrepair.<sup>11</sup> And, all of this can be gleaned with knowledge, judgement, and experience from the data which are available immediately following the election.



### CSAE and Bruce

Bruce is particularly critical of CSAE because it is a leading source of data on turnout and distributes, immediately after the election, the incomplete, but the only available data on the number of Americans who voted. For the record, CSAE was established 21 years ago to explore, explain and, where possible on a non-partisan basis, address the problem of declining participation in the United States. It issues up to six reports every election cycle to provide the public the best available data and analysis during the course of the election, and culminates with a final report up to 11 months after the election carrying all final and official figures. The form of these studies are identical: a covering press release detailing what CSAE believes can be reliably gleaned from the data; a set of notes explaining the complexities and limitations of the data; and the data itself, in a variety of spread sheets.

In analyzing CSAE's post-election report and other data, Bruce made a number of serious errors:

CSAE did not, as Bruce asserts, say anywhere that there were 100 million non-voters in 1996.<sup>12</sup> CSAE did not list, in the text of its release, California, Oregon and Washington as the jurisdictions with the lowest turnout. It listed Nevada, South Carolina and Hawaii.<sup>13</sup> And, it did not claim anywhere that the population of aliens was declining, but said in a phone interview with Bruce, accurately, that the percentage of aliens of the overall California population has been declining in recent elections.<sup>14</sup>

CSAE did not say that the raw results it was reporting would be one to three percentage points from some non-existent abstract ideal portrayal of the turnout, but that it would be one to three percentage points away from what the final turnout would be as a percentage of VAP. Similarly, CSAE did not say that final turnout levels would be—in some states—two to three percentage points different by themselves or in trend lines from some non-existent ideal figure, but from turnout figures and trends using Burnham's alien-adjusted VAP.

Finally, Bruce did not report the caveats CSAE placed on the data it released—both in the text and notes—regarding deficiencies in the Census' VAP statistics and the limitations of the Associated Press vote totals, particularly with respect to absentee voting in the West.

Still, CSAE did not play errorless baseball in its 1996 post-election report: (1) While it published and used a fairly accurate ballpark figure of 183 million as a voting age population without aliens, it did not proof-read its notes carefully enough to edit out the estimate of 11 million aliens it had recycled from 1992. (2) Its estimates, based on past experience, of deviations of one to three percentage points between preliminary figures and final figures were understated for four states.<sup>15</sup> (3) Its

estimate, based on a flawed calculation, of 93.7 million non-voters was too high (but not as far off the mark as Bruce's 82 million). (4) CSAE, in retrospect and based on data it did not have until April 1997, overestimated the percentage and numerical increase in registration in 1996 over 1992.<sup>16</sup>

But CSAE had 36 hours to compile and enter literally thousands of figures into its database, analyze them, produce a report, footnote and summarize that report, print and distribute it. Bruce had ten months to provide as much error as he has.

And CSAE, in that post-election report, kept alive its unblemished record of predicting within two-tenths of a percentage point the final turnout of VAP; correctly projected an historically comparable turnout that was the lowest since 1924 and second lowest since 1824; correctly showed that turnout had dropped in all 50 states and the District of Columbia; correctly showed 14 states which reported record low turnouts; correctly showed that 1996 was only the third time since 1924 when the actual number of citizens voting (despite an increase in those eligible) declined; correctly showed the weaknesses in the turnout for each major party; and correctly identified the states which would, when final ballots were counted, have the lowest turnout.

Not bad for 36 hours. Not bad as a snapshot of the election. Not bad as a service to the public. And a lot better than Peter Bruce's use of these figures.

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> The last state to report its certified total ballots cast figure was Colorado in late September 1997, fully ten months after the 1996 election. As a general rule over the last several elections, the difference between total ballots cast and presidential vote has fluctuated between 1.2 and 1.3 percentage points above the presidential total (about 1.8 above votes cast for office in mid-term elections). This year, however, the difference was 0.95 percentage points.

<sup>2</sup> See the first note in any CSAE report.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1,044,689 aliens were naturalized in 1996. Naturalizations in the period 1991-93—before the enactment of any immigration legislation nationally and in California—was 308,058, 240,252, and 314,681 or an average of 287,663. When Census made its March 1996 estimate of aliens, it had no reason to know of the substantial number of additional aliens who would be naturalized.

<sup>4</sup> The Census, in its decennial census, does not enumerate, mail, or survey citizens living outside the confines of the United States and its territories. The Census Voting Age Population statistics are interpolated from the decennial Census and thus do not include citizens residing abroad who are eligible to vote. According to the Office of Personnel Management, in 1997 there were 66,150 non-military governmental citizens residing outside of the US. According to the Department of Defense, there were an estimated 364,067 persons (military, civilian and age-eligible dependents) at US bases abroad (down from an estimated 740,566 in 1988). According to the US Consular Service, there were 3,270,143 non-military, non-governmental civilians residing outside the United States (up from 2,056,799). After consultation with others, a good estimate of those citizens who were age-eligible is about 75% of the total or 2,452,607 for 1996 and



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1,542,993 for 1988. Two things should be noted: (1) The net total of increased naturalizations and increase in the overseas citizen population not counted in the VAP, is greater than the increase in the number of convicted felons; and, (2) According to the Consular Service, the figure they gave for American citizens residing abroad is very understated, including only those who have had some interaction with the Consular Service. For the purposes of this paper, I used only the Consular Service's reported figure.

<sup>5</sup> There were two different reports on the census undercount compiled by the Bureau in the aftermath of the 1990 Census. Both came to similar overall figures—that the 1990 Census understated the population by more than 4 million. In one report, the largest undercount could be traced to people who did not own a home and people in the 18-29 age group. The other report found a significantly greater undercount among minorities. Both came to an overall figure of an undercount of slightly more than 1.6%. Obviously that undercount includes people who are not of age and aliens. To arrive at a figure of how the undercount would affect a voting-age population denominator, I applied the factor of 1.6 to lowest Voting Age Population Estimate available—Bruce's.

<sup>6</sup> There are still problems with this figure. As Bruce notes it does not include an indeterminate number of people in mental institutions, deemed incapacitated for the purposes of voting, which would reduce the denominator slightly. It also does not include an indeterminate number of fraudulent votes—people voting in two places, people voting in the names of those who have died or moved, and a number of aliens who cast illegal ballots, all of which would reduce the number of votes cast. Finally, it does not allocate the votes of those in the military residing on or around bases within the US, which for the purposes of estimating voting-age population are counted in the states of their bases but may vote in other states.

<sup>7</sup> Burnham's figure of the citizen age-eligible vote for 1996 was 188,421,000. His methodology is explained in a 1986 *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* essay. His denominators stretch back to the first American presidential election. From 1798 to 1860, his figures are based on the census without respect to aliens who were not enumerated. Since 1870 his figures interpolate between censuses which with the exception of two censuses, the most recent 1960, which did not enumerate aliens.

<sup>8</sup> This would also be true with respect to 1988 and 1992 in terms of total ballots cast. For years before that, there are no consistent figures.

<sup>9</sup> In the text of CSAE's post-election study, November 7, 1996, the words, "The study was based on final, unofficial and (in the case of West Coast states still counting absentee ballots) not totally complete tallies." In its notes, "These figures, in most states, are final but unofficial and in some states, most notably in the West, they are not fully final—which is why the Committee's estimate for national turnout exceeds the vote totals provided by NES." (sic, should have been either VNS or Associated Press.)

<sup>10</sup> If Bruce had used the consistent figure of presidential vote and had applied a state's proportional (of the national population) share of the missing elements of the VAP—naturalizations, citizens residing abroad, and the census undercount, his proclaimed deviations of preliminary figures from final figures would be reduced by three or more percentage points. If he had noted the undercount and its potential skew towards minorities, that difference would have been further reduced in those states with high minority populations—Arizona, California, Florida, New York and Texas.

<sup>11</sup> See CSAE, post-election report, November 7, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> The Committee made, in its immediate post-election report, an estimate of 93.7 million non-voters. See CSAE, op. cit., third paragraph. If one uses Burnham's citizen-

age-eligible population, then non-voters were either 92 million, using presidential vote, or 91 million, using total ballots cast.

<sup>13</sup> The Committee has not used the states of Alaska, California, Oregon and Washington in the text of its immediate post-election reports since 1984 because of uncertainty over how many votes remain to be counted. Based on final figures, Texas joined Nevada, South Carolina and Hawaii as the states with the lowest turnout.

<sup>14</sup> As one can note from Bruce's figures on the alien population, while the number of aliens nationally went up through 1996, it went down in California, as a percentage of overall population.

<sup>15</sup> In 1996, the data on the percent of VAP which turned out, released in its preliminary report, were within one percentage point of the final percentages of turnout (of VAP) in 36 states, within two percentage points in five states, and within three percentage points in six states. Only the states of California (slightly over four percentage points) and Alaska, Oregon and Washington (substantially greater), did the early number fall outside the tolerances suggested by CSAE's notes. CSAE's estimate was based on past experience and its error in these four states was due to two factors—one, as Bruce notes, the increased use of no-fault absentee balloting which in Oregon reached close to 50% and, secondly, changes in the timing of the count of those ballots, now reserved by Oregon and Washington to be done after the live ballot is counted. CSAE and its director will learn, in future reports, from error.

<sup>16</sup> CSAE, in its immediate pre-election registration study and in its immediate post-election study, estimated the net new registrants at 5 million. Later data on registrants moved to inactive lists (those who had been on the list but who ordinarily would have been purged because they moved from the jurisdiction) indicates that the figure should have been between 3 and 4 million rather than 5 million.



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