

How the Experts Got Voter Turnout Wrong Last Year

By Peter Bruce

Two days after the 1996 elections, the media proclaimed that more eligible voters had abstained than had voted, that turnout had fallen to 48.8%—its lowest level since 1924—and that state turnouts had hit such abysmal lows as 44% in New York and 39% in California.¹ This depiction has been widely accepted.² But despite its acceptance, it's wrong.

“CSAE reported that 95.8 million people voted and 100 million abstained, out of an eligible electorate of approximately 196 million. In fact, after all the returns were in, an additional 2 million people—97.8 million—had voted, while 82 million abstained, out of an eligible electorate of 179 million.”

Voter turnout equals the total number of votes cast divided by the eligible electorate. The “experts” erred regarding both numerator and denominator by: (1) calculating turnout with incomplete returns, and (2) equating the US Census Bureau’s voting age population (VAP) figures with the eligible electorate, even though the VAP is inflated by almost 10% with people legally ineligible to vote. Both missteps led to exaggerating and sensationalizing turnout decline. If turnout is calculated with complete returns and with the VAP purged of ineligible voters, we see that a clear majority—54.5%—of eligible voters cast ballots, with 53.7% voting for president. These figures exceed 1988’s turnout of 52.2%, and was thus not the lowest turnout since 1924.³ The experts’ state-turnout figures erred further. Two glaring examples are their underestimates of New York’s turnout by 22% and California’s by 33%.

Table 1 shows the differences between the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate’s (CSAE) voter turnout, the most widely used figures for assessing turnout, and the adjusted turnout values developed in this article. Table 2 contains the detailed values for calculating the adjusted turnouts for 13 selected states and the nation.

Late Returns, Felons, and Immigrants

CSAE reported that 95.8 million people voted and 100 million abstained, out of an eligible electorate of approximately 196 million.⁴ In fact, after all the returns were in, an additional 2 million people—97.8 million—had voted, while 82 million abstained, out of an *eligible* electorate of 179 million.

By equating the VAP with the eligible electorate, CSAE counted 17 million adults legally barred from voting (the largest groups being illegal aliens, legal aliens but not naturalized citizens, and felons) as eligible voters.⁵ Further, by not using complete returns to calculate the number of voters casting ballots for president, CSAE missed a half million votes. Another 1.4 million votes from people casting valid ballots but not voting for president were missed. These citizens obviously turned out to vote and thus should be counted.⁶

CSAE’s state-turnout figures err more than their national numbers by not accounting for large concentrations of aliens in some states, by equating state VAP

with the eligible electorate, and not estimating the large number of late absentee voters, especially in West Coast states. For instance, adding the 1.25 million late votes missed in California and subtracting 5.45 million ineligible voters from its VAP of 23 million raises that state’s turnout to 58%, a significant increase over the experts’ 39%.⁷ Similar adjustments raise Washington’s turnout from 43% to 61% and Oregon’s from 29% to 61%.⁸

The same problems are found in turnout figures for other states with large immigrant populations. For instance, if turnout is calculated with complete returns and ineligible voters excluded from the VAPs, it changes to 56% from 44% for New York, 59% instead of 50% for New Jersey, and 57% from 48% for Florida.⁹

These errors obstruct accurate comparisons and ranking of states by turnout. For instance, if one were to analyze whether liberalized absentee voting on the West Coast increased voter turnout, the experts’ statistics would erroneously show that such voting accompanied the worst turnouts in the nation.¹⁰ Actually, these states’ turnouts averaged about 60%, well above the national average. The other states with large alien populations, noted above, also rank considerably higher when actual turnout, instead of the experts’ figures, are used for comparison.

The Impact

Inaccurate statistics on turnout confuse intellectual discourse. They also do injustice to activists, government officials, and the public by depriving them of information needed to accurately assess the effects of their reforms, get-out-the-vote drives, and voting efforts, especially when the actual turnouts are better than reported. By systematically underestimating turnouts, the experts may contribute to the very voting decline they bemoan, by purveying an image of American politics as more moribund than it is.

Table 1
What Proportion of Eligible Americans Voted in the 1996 National Elections?
The Press Reports Were Far Off the Mark

State	Reported Turnout ¹	Adjusted Turnout ²	Percentage Point Difference between Reported and Adjusted
Arizona	42%	52%	10
California	39	58	19
Florida	48	57	9
Illinois	49	55	6
Maryland	45	51	6
Massachusetts	55	60	5
Michigan	53	58	5
New Jersey	50	59	9
New York	44	56	12
Pennsylvania	49	50	1
Texas	41	48	7
Virginia	47	51	4
Washington	43	61	18
United States Total	49	55	6

¹ Turnout figures as reported in *USA Today*, November 7, 1996, p. 17A. These data reflect the estimates released to the press by the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate in its post-election report, with one exception: CSAE's post-election report included an estimate of turnout in Oregon that was not included.

² Adjusted Turnout is from Table 2.

This is not to say that voter participation in the United States is healthy. Running between 50-55% in presidential elections, and at about 40% in congressional elections in recent decades, it lags far below the turnouts of other Western democracies. These nations' turnouts generally average between 70 and 95% with less-affluent groups participating at about the same rate as the more affluent.¹¹ In the US, on the other hand, people from high-income families and occupations are almost twice as likely to vote as those from low-income ones.¹² Recent US turnouts have also been much lower than those in the 19th century and turnouts between 1936 and 1968, which generally exceeded 60%.¹³

Thus, while the experts deserve credit for noting that turnout underwent a major decline from 1992 to 1996, their inaccuracies risk undermining their credibility and trivializing the turnout

problem. That problem remains about as bad as it was in 1988, but is nowhere near 1924's 44% turnout, even though the Associated Press announced last November 7 that 1996's turnout would likely be the lowest since 1824!¹⁴

Changes in Population and Voting Methods Cause Inaccuracies

Why have the prevailing methods been used? The main reason is that they worked far better in the past than they do now. These methods have been confounded by two dramatic changes. First, the rapid increase in both the proportion of US residents who are not citizens and, to a lesser degree, the increase in the felon population compared to the growth of the eligible electorate. The second factor is the increasing popularity of voting by mail.

The US has, since 1980, experi-

enced its largest wave of immigration since World War I, accounting for the burgeoning of adult aliens from 10 million to 14.25 million between 1990 and March 1996, and probably to 14.6 million by November 1996.¹⁵ CSAE's recent claims that this population was declining, and numbered only 11 million in 1996, in contrast to Census Reports and academic works, shows how seriously misunderstood these trends are.¹⁶ The next-largest ineligible group in the VAP is felons who number approximately 2.75 million persons in states denying them the right to vote. This segment has grown rapidly with the US prison population more than tripling between 1980 and 1995; the total adult population under correctional supervision in 1995 stood at 5.4 million.¹⁷

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Table 2
The Proper Denominator is the Number of Eligible Voters,
Not the Voting Age Population

in thousands

State	Voting Age Population ¹	Ineligible Resident Aliens ²	Ineligible Felons	Number of Eligible Voters	Total Number Voting ⁴	Total Voting as a Proportion of Eligible Voters
Arizona	3,094	261	55	2,778	1,431	52%
California	23,133	5,053	375	17,705	10,263	58%
Florida	11,043	1,306	265	9,472	5,444	57%
Illinois	8,764	690	112	7,962	4,418	55%
Maryland	3,811	253	57	3,501	1,794	51%
Massachusetts	4,623	280	0	4,343	2,600	60%
Michigan	7,067	236	41	6,790	3,912	58%
New Jersey	6,005	622	153	5,230	3,105	59%
New York	13,579	1,900	207	11,472	6,439	56%
Pennsylvania	9,196	185	28	8,983	4,506	50%
Texas	13,622	1,448	462	11,712	5,612	48%
Virginia	5,089	189	62	4,838	2,468	51%
Washington	4,122	256	79	3,787	2,294	61%
United States	196,509	14,598	2,774	179,137	97,750	55%

¹ US Bureau of the Census, "Projections of the Voting-Age Population for the States for the November 1996 Election" and "Statistical Brief: Election 1996—Counting the American Electorate," April 1996.

² US Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Survey* (March 1996) Table 3. Foreign born, 18 years old or over, not US citizens, adjusted by estimates of the increase or decrease in the resident alien population from the date of the Census survey to the time of the 1996 elections.

³ Voting rights for felons differ considerably from state to state. For figures on felons on probation, in prison, and on parole, see *Correctional Populations in the United States, 1995*, US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics publication NCJ-163916, May 1997, pp. 40, 86, and 128. For a list of state rules regarding felon voting rights, see David B. Rottmann, Carol R. Flango, and R. Shedine Lockley, *State Court Organization, 1993*, US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics publication NCJ-148346, January 1995, pp. 325-329.

⁴ Total vote as compiled by Election Data Services, "1996 Registration and Turnout by State," May 13, 1997.

the VAP, up from 10 million and 5.5% of the VAP in 1988.¹⁸ Both groups grew more than 15 times faster than the eligible electorate between 1988 and 1996.¹⁹ Their proportion of the VAP also overshadows the 7.8% that aliens constituted in the 1930 VAP, and approaches the 10.4% that aliens comprised of the VAP in 1920. That year, the Census began the practice, discontinued after 1950, of subtracting aliens from the VAP to calculate detailed figures for "voting age citizens."²⁰

The second historic change confounding the experts has been the increasingly popular practice of "no-ex-

cuse-needed" absentee voting on the West Coast.²¹ It allows eligible voters, for any reason, to vote by mail, thereby increasing their convenience, especially for the disabled, sick, elderly, and persons reluctant to take time off from work or otherwise trek to the polls. It also allows family, friends, and neighbors to deliberate over candidates and issues at home, especially important in states where pamphlets describing ballot measures ran from 90 to 250 pages in the last election.²²

Voting by mail injected serious error into the experts' calculation of West Coast turnouts, since it took up to three

weeks in California and Washington, and three days after the election in Oregon, to check mail ballots for fraud and then fully report tallies.²³ Thus, voting by mail largely accounted for the 2.5 million West Coast votes that were reported after the experts made their call, as one-fifth of Californians, one-third of Washingtonians, and half of Oregon's voters used this method.²⁴

The Experts' Defense

CSAE defends using unadjusted VAP figures because they have become institutionalized, as "the most commonly and continuously used denomi-

The Turnout Muddle

nators for determining turnout.”²⁵ Like the Census Bureau, whose lead it follows, CSAE prefers to maintain consistent data series, timelines, and “facts” upon which there has been general agreement between themselves, the Census Bureau, the media, and academics doing contemporary election analyses rather than opt for a more accurate measure of eligible electorates.²⁶

CSAE also tends to downplay their error. For instance, they say their national-turnout figure is “perhaps in the range of 2-3 percentage points, slightly less in recent years as the percentage of aliens has declined.... to only 11 million who

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could not vote in the VAP.”²⁷ Yet, its national-turnout figure erred by 5 to 6 percentage points, and, as noted, its statements about aliens are contradicted by Census Bureau reports and academic works. Likewise, CSAE maintains that its state-turnout figures are “accurate” and that even its West Coast figures, which it concedes have the most error, “understate likely final turnout figures by anywhere from one to three percentage points.”²⁸ Table 1, however, questions these numbers.

Although CSAE will publish an updated report with complete returns this fall, that will only cut its error by about half for the West Coast, since its continued use of the VAP will still leave sizable errors in those and other states with large immigrant populations. There is no reason to retain the use of this measure, especially since the Census has, since 1990, resumed publishing relatively accurate statistics on the number of aliens in the VAP. Thus, even though it does not publish figures on the eligible electorate or “voting age citizens” per se, these can now be easily calculated.²⁹

More Rigorous Methods Needed

Unless more rigorous methods are used, turnout analyses in the mass media will grow more inaccurate. Certainly, non-citizen and criminal populations will continue to grow faster than the eligible electorate, and voting by mail is also likely to grow in popularity.

The solution to the problems these changes create will be for the distributors of turnout data to wait until mail-in ballot tallies are sufficiently available before publishing their reports, and to eliminate the main ineligible populations from the VAPs

before calculating turnouts. The latter would bring their turnout figures closer to those from the more rigorous academic works and historical reference books, which exclude most ineligibles from VAPs. The Census Bureau could also assist by offering figures for “voting age citizens” or eligible voters, as it did during the last large immigration wave. Finally, the states could streamline their processing of mail ballots and perhaps, like Oregon, tally them within three days after the election.

These changes could and should be implemented before the next election.

Endnotes

¹ For typical articles, see Eric Schmitt, “Half the Electorate, Perhaps Satisfied or Bored, Sat Out Voting,” *New York Times* (November 7, 1996), and Bob Minzesheimer, “Turnout Takes a Record Downturn: Nonvoters Outnumber the Voters,” *USA Today* (November 7, 1996), p. 3A. Similar stories ran in *The Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Portland Oregonian*, on *ABC Nightly News*, and in other media.

² See, for example, Karen O'Connor and Larry Sabato, *American Government* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1997); Marcia Smith, “Alone at the Polls: A National Embarrassment,” *Social Policy*, Vol. 27 No. 1, pp. 4-9; and Everett Carl Ladd, “The Election Polls,” *Current*, February 1997, pp. 26-28.

³ Walter Dean Burnham, “Realignment Lives: The 1994 Earthquake and Its Implications,” *The Clinton Presidency* (eds.) Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers), p. 384.

⁴ *USA Today* (November 7, 1996), p. 3A.

⁵ In addition to aliens and felons, the VAP also includes about a half million people in mental institutions who are ineligible to vote.

⁶ It is reasonable to maintain the tradition of calculating turnout from presidential votes for the sake of consistency, extending statistical time-lines, and avoiding problems related to the failure of about one-third of all states to report their total number of valid ballots cast. On the other hand, with over a million voters choosing not to vote for president in 1988 and 1996, it seems that using figures for total ballots cast provides a more accurate picture of turnout. For this reason, I have used such figures where possible. This generally adds no more than 1 percentage point to the turnout figures.

⁷ CSAE used the AP's day-after-the-election figure, and thus recorded only 9 million votes for California, rather than the 10.25 million that were cast. See CSAE's *1996 Election Report*.

⁸ Though the *Current Population Survey* did not sample Oregon's alien population, if one assumes that it included the same proportion of the nation's total alien population in 1996 as it did in 1990, its turnout would have been 61% rather than the 29% reported by CSAE.

⁹ The most up-to-date, official figures for aliens are those in the US Census Bureau's *Current Population Survey*, which has estimated foreign-born and other populations from phone interviews. Like the Census, this tool tends to underestimate populations. Indeed, it admits that its numbers generally underestimate populations by about 8%, although this varies by age, race, sex, and other factors. It almost certainly underestimates alien populations by more than this, given the fear that many illegal immigrants and their legal relatives and friends have of public exposure. See, US Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Survey, 1996* and the source and accuracy statement for the report, *The Foreign Born Population: 1996*, p. 348.

¹⁰ Ranking state turnouts from highest to lowest, CSAE's *1996 Election Report* places Washington, California, and Oregon in 41st,

50th, and 51st places, respectively, among the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

¹¹ Walter Dean Burnham, "The Turnout Problem," *Classic Readings in American Politics* (eds.) Pietro Nivola and David Rosenbloom (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), p. 131. See also, Walter Dean Burnham, "The Appearance and Disappearance of the American Voter: An Historical Overview," *The Disappearance of the American Voter: A Symposium on Declining Voter Participation* (Palo Alto, CA: American Bar Association, 1978), pp. 126-29.

¹² Walter Dean Burnham, "The Turnout Problem" and "The Appearance and Disappearance of the American Voter: An Historical Overview." See also, Raymond Wolfinger, *Improving Voter Participation*, paper delivered at the National Conference for Improving the Electoral Process, Northeastern University, December 10-11, 1993. On p. 26., he shows that except for a handful of states allowing election day voter registration or requiring no registration at all, 46% of voters were from families earning less than \$10,000 but 79% were from families earning more than \$40,000 voted in 1988.

¹³ Burnham, "The Turnout Problem," p. 136.

¹⁴ Burnham, "The Turnout Problem" and Associated Press, "Turnout Likely Will Hit 172 year Low," (November 7, 1996).

¹⁵ See Lester Thurow, *The Future of Capitalism* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1996), Chapters 5 and 8. Also, Kristen A. Hansen and Carol S. Faber, "The Foreign Born Population: 1996," *Current Population Reports* (Washington, DC: US Bureau of the Census, March 1997), p. 20-494. The national figure of 14.6 million is calculated by the same means as the state estimates for aliens in November 1996.

¹⁶ CSAE, "Notes and Summary" *1996 Election Report*, p. 1.

¹⁷ The prison population grew from 329,821 in 1980 to 1,126,287 at the end of 1995. *Statistical Abstracts of the United States, 1995*, p. 218. See also, *Correctional Populations in the United States*, p. 86.

¹⁸ Derived from figures in Paul R. Abrahamson, John H. Aldrich, and David

Rhode, *Change and Continuity in the 1988 Elections* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1990), p. 114.

¹⁹ Aliens grew from 9 million to 14.75 million, or by 63.8% in these years. See Paul Abrahamson et al. The nation's total felon population, which roughly equals the number of felons on probation plus all persons in prison and on parole, grew from 1.9 million to 3.235 million or by 70.3%. This compares data in *Correctional Populations in the United States, 1988* with that in the 1995 edition. The eligible electorate grew from roughly 176.7 million, according to calculations by Walter Dean Burnham (presented in *Change and Continuity*, p. 114) in 1988 to 179 million in 1996 (Table 2), for a change of 1.3%. In discussing his national time series for voter turnout, Burnham does not mention the need to exclude felons (see "The Turnout Problem," p. 137) who have numbered over a million only since 1980, and his figure for the eligible electorate appears to include them. Assuming that in 1988, like 1996, approximately 80% of felons were denied voting rights by state laws then, working from his original figure, the eligible electorate would have equalled approximately 175 million in 1988 and would have grown 2.2% by 1996, or about 1/30th of the rate of the felon and alien populations. Though a full-length scholarly article could be written on different ways of calculating turnout in this and other elections, I believe that the eligible electorate was closer to 172 million in 1988. This result is obtained by using the VAP that includes institutional populations, especially the overseas military component, then assuming that the civilian overseas and mental institution populations (one of which needs to be added, and the other subtracted) approximately cancel each other out, and then subtracting aliens and those felons who have lost their voting rights. With this figure, the eligible electorate grew by about 4% between 1988 and 1996. When turnout is calculated using this figure and the 1988 presidential vote, it is larger than in Burnham's calculations, but still less than 1996's—53.3% versus 53.7%.

²⁰ "Population," "General Report, Statistics by Subjects," and "Citizenship of the Foreign Born," *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*, p. 405.

²¹ Polls find between a half and three-quarters of Oregonians saying they prefer to vote by mail, while 8-28% have no preference and 15-17% prefer voting at the polls. See Phil Keisling, Oregon Secretary of State's Office, Oregon's Vote-by-Mail Elections, pamphlet, August 12, 1996. In Washington, such voting grew explosively between 1992 and 1996, as the number of absentee ballots in King County (Seattle) sextupled from 32,000 to 199,315. See "Voting by Mail: Will Election Day Ever End?" *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (November 17, 1996). Liberalized absentee voting was also near its highest level ever in California in 1996. Betty Washington, press officer for Secretary of State Bill Jones, Interview, December 1996.

²² Interviews with various West Coast state officials.

²³ Oregon had the most streamlined system for mail voting and was required by law to count all of its ballots within three days of the election. California and Washington have laws giving local officials up to three weeks to process mail ballots. See "Voting by Mail" for Washington, and news stories about the Dornan/Sanchez race for California.

²⁴ For Washington, see "Voting by Mail." For Oregon, see "Oregon Will Post Lowest." For California, see Betty Washington, Interview, December 1996.

²⁵ CSAE, *GOP Gains First Vote Plurality Since 1946* (June 6, 1995).

²⁶ Everett Carll Ladd, "The Turnout Muddle," *America at the Polls, 1996* (eds.) Regina Dougherty, et al. (Storrs, CT: The Roper Center, 1997), p. 34.

²⁷ CSAE, "Notes and Summary," *1996 Election Report*, p. 1.

²⁸ CSAE, "Notes and Summary."

²⁹ The Census Bureau's CD ROMs for the 1990 census allows one to calculate the number of aliens of voting age for the nation, states, cities, and minor civil divisions.



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