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2014 Statewide Primaries Half-Time Report:

NATIONAL TURNOUt TRENdING TOWARD RECORD LOW

FIFTEEN OF TWENTY-FIVE STATES SET NEW LOW TURNOUT RECORDS

CONVENIENCE VOTING HAS NOT HELPED

Washington, July 21 – If the first 25 statewide primaries (for U.S. Senate and/or state governor) are any guide, the nation is likely to witness the lowest midterm primary turnout in history. It is also likely to witness the greatest number of states setting records for low voter turnout.

--National turnout for the 25 states which held statewide primaries for both major parties reported a decline of 3.5 percentage points or 18 percent from the turnout in 2010. The national percentage of eligible citizens who voted in these primaries was 14.8 percent, down from 18.3 percent in 2010. Only 18,201,718 out of 122,751,000 age-eligible citizens voted for governor and/or U.S. Senator in these primaries.

--Turnout in fifteen of the twenty-five states which held statewide primaries reached historic lows. Only three of those 25 states had higher turnout in 2014 than in 2010.

Documentation for this report in the form of summary charts, graphs, detailed charts and methodological notes can be found at cselectorate.blogspot.com.

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Republican turnout at 8.2 percent dropped 1.4 percentage points or 15 percent from its 2010 level of 9.6 percent of the age-eligible citizens. But GOP turnout was only slightly off its 13 midterm election average of 8.9 percent.

These were among the highlights of a report on official and certified final turnout figures for all the contested statewide primary elections prior to July by the non-partisan Center for the Study of the American Electorate (CSAE). The aggregate national turnout figures in this report are based on the average turnout of all the states which held primaries in any given midterm election. (Some of the states that held primaries in 2014 did not do so in any given previous election. Mississippi, Montana and South Dakota did not do so in 2010. In the detailed charts section of this report, there are charts providing comparisons between states that held primaries in every prior midterm election. Those charts don’t change the essential conclusions based on averages in this report.)

Among other findings:

--Overall turnout, the turnout in both Democratic and Republican primaries combined was 17.1 percentage points or 54 percent lower that the most recent high of 31.9 percent of age-eligible citizens voting in 1966.

--Democratic turnout was 14.5 percentage points or 70 percent lower than their most recent high of 20.9 percent of eligibles voting in 1970.

--Republican turnout was down five percentage points or 38 percent from its high water mark of 13.2 percent of eligibles voting in 1966.

--There were only three states – West Virginia, Nebraska and North Carolina – of the 22 which held statewide primaries in both parties and had comparable elections that had higher turnout in 2014 than in 2010. Democratic turnout as compared to 2010 was higher four states. Republican turnout was higher in six of the 22 states.

--Both overall turnout and Democratic turnout reached record lows in 15 of the 25 states that had statewide primaries. The GOP recorded record lows in three states – Maine, Nevada and Pennsylvania – but also recorded record high turnout in four states – Arkansas, Mississippi (in the senatorial runoff), Montana and Oklahoma.
Convenience Voting

Of the four states with election day registration (out of 25 with statewide races) – Colorado, Idaho, Iowa and Maine – all had lower turnout in 2014 as compared to 2010. Idaho, Iowa and Maine set low turnout records.

Of the states that have all-mail voting in elections, Oregon had a record low turnout in its statewide primary, Colorado reported turnout lower than in 2010. In California, where 69 percent of the eligible electorate voted by mail and which has been experimenting with a “top two” primary system in which the two top vote-getters in a primary regardless of party affiliation move on to the general election, turnout was the lowest ever.

Eleven states had early in-person voting where citizens could go to polling places set up to facilitate in-person voting for a given number of days prior to election day. Of these, three had higher turnout, eight had lower turnout and six had record low turnouts.

Thirteen states have adopted no excuse absentee voting whereby citizens without stating a reason can request to vote absentee, be sent a ballot a given number of days before an election and cast that ballot by mail. Of those states two had higher turnout, eleven had lower turnout and eleven set new low turnout records.

Eight states conduct their elections with both early voting and no excuse absentee balloting. Of these, two had higher turnout, six had lower turnout and six set new low turnout records.

There were four states that adopted none of these reforms – Kentucky, South Carolina, Alabama and Pennsylvania. All had lower turnout. Only one, Alabama, set a record for low turnout.

State Data

Note: There are two figures in each of the following paragraphs with respect to increases and decreases in turnout. The first figure is the numerical change in turnout or how many percentage points turnout increased or decreased. The second is what percent change this represents between the state’s turnout in 2010 and 2014.

The states with the highest overall turnout (turnout for both parties) were Montana (26.3 percent of eligibles), followed by Kentucky (22.8), Nebraska (21.8), Mississippi (21.1), Oregon (19.8) and California (18.1).
Iowa had the lowest overall turnout at (9.7 percent of eligibles), followed by Nevada (9.9), Maine (10.1), Ohio (11.2), Texas (11.4), South Carolina (12.1) and Pennsylvania (12.5).

The only states with an increase in turnout over 2010 were West Virginia (up 4.8 or percentage points or up 47.9 percent from 2010), followed by Nebraska (4.4 or 25.1) and North Carolina (1.8 or 15.5).

The greatest decrease in turnout was recorded by Maine (minus 14.5 percentage points or -59.1 percent from 2010), followed by Arkansas (-7.5 or -32.9), Pennsylvania (-7.1 or -36.3), Nevada (-6.8 or -40.7), Alabama (-6.1 or -26.5), South Carolina (-6.0 or -33.0) and Oregon (-5.2 or -20.1).

The highest Democratic turnout was recorded in Kentucky (12.1 percent of eligibles), followed by Maryland (11.7), Oregon (10.5), Montana (9.6), West Virginia (9.1) and Pennsylvania (8.7).

The lowest Democratic turnout was in Idaho (2.2 percent of eligibles), Nevada (2.6), Iowa (2.8), South Carolina (3.2), Texas (3.3) and Mississippi (3.9).

The four states where the Democratic Party registered higher turnout than in 2014 as compared to 2010 were West Virginia (up 2.72 percentage points or 42.6 percent), followed by New Mexico (0.7 or 8.8), Nebraska (0.6 or 14.6) and North Carolina (0.5 or 7.3).

The greatest decreases in Democratic turnout were recorded in Arkansas (minus 8.9 percentage points or -55.7 percent), followed by Maine (-6.5 or -55.5), Illinois (-5.3 or -51.2), Alabama (-4.1 or -45.1), Kentucky (-4.0 or 25.0), Nevada (-4.0 or 60.2) and Colorado (-3.9 or -40.2).

The highest Republican turnout was in the Mississippi senatorial runoff at 17.2 percent of eligibles, followed by Montana (16.8), Nebraska (16.7), Idaho (13.4), South Dakota (12.0) and Alabama (11.9).

The smallest GOP turnout was recorded in New Jersey (2.4 percent of eligibles, followed by Pennsylvania (3.8), New Mexico (4.4), Maine (5.1), Maryland (5.2) and West Virginia (5.8).

The greatest increase in Republican turnout occurred in Nebraska (up 3.7 percentage points or 28.8 percent) followed by West Virginia (2.1 or 57.3), Arkansas (1.4 or 20.0), North Carolina (1.3 or 24.2), Illinois (0.7 or 8.5) and Oklahoma (0.4 or 4.5).
The greatest GOP decrease occurred in Maine (-7.6 percentage points or -60.1 percent), followed by Pennsylvania (-5.1 or -57.1), New Mexico (-4.2 or -48.7), Nevada (-4.1 or -40.9), South Carolina (-3.6 or -28.8) and Iowa (-3.2 or -31.8).

Commentary:

1. A Problem for American Democracy: Some of the individual state turnout figures in this report are because there was no or minimal competition for a statewide office. But it was ever thus and that excuse cannot explain the continuing steep decline in participation that has been occurring over decades. Many decades ago citizens turned out to vote out of a sense of civic duty and because of an allegiance to one or other major party. That motivation has largely been lost. The numbers in this report reflect how deeply citizens are turning away from political engagement and from positive feeling about one or another major political party.

There are consequences for this. Political parties in theory provide a degree of cohesion to American politics. That cohesion is being lost. High levels of involvement lessen the chances that both parties and politics will be dominated by narrow ideology and interest. Low levels make that result probable. Nominees who have support of a substantial segment of the electorate have can lead with a degree of confidence. Those without must tread lightly. Voting has been shown to be a lowest common denominator political act. Those who vote tend not to participate in other societal useful and involving activities. As turnout goes down, so does the reservoir of political interest that breeds involvement.

Low turnout is more than a set of figures to lament, it is an indicator of deep problems within American democracy.

2. A problem for American Politics: The turnout figures in this report are for the races drawing the largest number of citizens to the polls. The participation rates for Congressional and state legislative primaries are lower. If average Democratic statewide turnout has now dropped to six percent of the electorate, turnout for lesser offices is likely to be between four and five percent. If turnout for Republican statewide primaries stands at eight percent, turnout for lesser offices is likely to be between six and seven percent. Thanks to the drawing of the lines for Congressional and state legislative districts in most states on a partisan basis, the nation has a huge number of one-party districts. In those districts, the winner of a primary election is de facto the winner of the general election and with the minuscule number of citizens turning out, it offers the possibility grown to probability that organized interests representing the views of only three to four percent of the electorate can win those primaries and propel one of their own to office.
The result can be seen in how the Tea Party has become a dominant player in Republican Congressional and state legislative politics. But the danger exists for both parties.

3. The Illusion of the Quick Procedural Fix: This report shows how many states have moved to modify their electoral procedure in a manner that they believe will enhance participation. The data in this report shows that the hope of enhancing turnout by making it easier is the wrong way to approach the disengagement problem and, in some cases, is dangerous. Both no-excuse absentee voting and mail voting have been shown in all elections, save ones that are very local, to hurt turnout. They also, by eliminating the secret ballot, offer the greatest possibility for fraud and intimidation. They coupled with in-person early voting present the possibility that late-breaking events that would otherwise determine election outcomes would have their effect minimized by the high number of irrevocable ballots cast.

We have made it easier and easier to vote, at some risk, without having a positive effect on turnout. The reasons should be obvious. The core problem of participation does not reside in the realm of procedure, but rather in motivation. Contributing factors to the decline in motivation are not hard to find: campaigns that are run on scurrilous attack ads that give the citizen a perceived choice between bad and awful; one major party situated far to the right of the American center and the other without a clear and durable message; a decline in faith that government will address major societal need exacerbated by those whose politics seek to accomplish just that; a majority of the young growing up in households in which their parents don’t vote and a larger majority who hear no discussions of politics or public affairs; inadequate civic education in the schools; the fragmenting effects of modern communications technology that has made grazing the Internet a substitute for reading the news, preoccupation with one’s iPhone and its narrow personal community at the expense of interpersonal discussion and participation in a broader community; increased inequality that has the collateral effect of reducing hope for those at the bottom; the rise of libertarian and consumerist values at the expense of values that would promote community and collective engagement, the reduced coverage of politics in the visual media, to name but a few.

Durable revitalization of American democracy will not be solved by procedural quick fixes. Making it easier is not the motto the nation should have about political involvement. Democracy is a demanding religion and the approach to strengthening it should demand more not less of its citizenry. But revitalization also demands dealing forthrightly with those aspects of the American polity that are sapping that motivation and that entails leaders who are willing to think and act large rather than small.
4. **A Few Changes That Might Help:** There are 61 million eligible American citizens who are not registered and thus cannot vote. There are more than 20 million names on registration lists that are invalid. And we have the biennial min-melodrama of claims of fraud suppression and intimidation that cannot help but undermine faith in the election process. All of these problems could be eliminated if the United States emulated Mexico in creating a biometric national identification card and system. It would automatically enfranchise the 61 million, eliminate inaccurate voting lists, make voting a one-step act and eliminate the possibility of all type of fraud other than vote buying and election official misconduct.

Instead of early voting, each state should have New York’s hours (6 a.m. to 9 p.m.) offering citizens a chance to vote on both ends of the work day. Every state should have what Colorado widely uses – vote centers in accessible places where citizen can go and get and cast a ballot identical to the one that they would have gotten in one’s precinct. And every state should receive an information pamphlet similar to those used on the west coast (and a few other places0 that gives the biography, the self-ascribed issue positions of each candidate and the pros and cons of ballot propositions written by proponents and opponents – which has shown to help cut through the demagoguery of political advertising.