

US election notes:

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7 November 1998

Voter turnout at 56-year low

The \$1 billion election

Voter turnout at 56-year low

By Barry Grey

Only 36.1 percent of voting-age Americans went to the polls in last Tuesday's midterm elections, the lowest percentage turnout since 1942. The figure for overall voter participation, reported in a survey released November 6 by the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, underscores the increasing alienation of masses of people from the political establishment and the narrowing base of both the Republican and Democratic parties.

Other statistics in the CSAE report shed further light on this process:

- * Despite a nearly 8 million increase in the number of Americans eligible to vote and a 4 million increase in those registered, fewer citizens cast ballots in 1998 than in the 1994 midterm election. The decline was 2.5 million. An estimated 119,450,000 eligible voters stayed away from the ballot box this year, the largest number in US history.

- * This was the fourth national election in the last seven in which the actual number of votes cast fell, despite population increases. It continues a trend that has seen a 26 percent decline (12.5 percentage points) since midterm election participation hit its post-women's suffrage peak of 46.6 percent in 1966.

- * Percentage turnout in the 1988 election in states outside of the old Confederacy was the lowest since 1818.

- * At least 36 states and the District of Columbia recorded lower turnout. Participation was down in every part of the nation except the farm regions of the Midwest.

- * The Republican Party had the greatest decline in turnout, falling 19 percent (4.3 percentage points) from a 22.4 percent share of the eligible vote in 1994 to 18.1

percent in 1998. Democratic turnout also fell, although less steeply. It was down 2.1 percentage points from 18.9 percent in 1994 to 16.8 percent this year. The Republican national vote still exceeded the Democratic midterm vote for only the second time since 1946 (the other being 1994).

The report highlighted the growing discontent with both the Democratic and Republican parties. It noted that the election of Reform Party candidate Jesse Ventura as governor of Minnesota, the state with the highest voter turnout in the country, was only the most graphic expression of a protracted erosion in popular support for the two traditional parties of big business. "Over the last three decades," the CSAE noted, "Democratic registration has declined by 25 percent in the states with partisan registration, GOP [Republican] registration has declined by more than 10 percent outside the South, and independent registration has increased 800 percent."

Said CSAE Director Curtis Gans, "Ventura's victory is only the latest tangible manifestation of citizen disaffection from the two major political parties."

Gans spoke bluntly of the political crisis indicated by the decline in voter turnout. "While the citizens continue to show in individual elections in some individual states that they are willing to turn out when there appears something important to decide, those elections are the exception. The rule is that the impulse to civic engagement is eroding, our elected officials are getting elected with smaller and more fragile mandates, by-and-large there is a falling away from the principal political vehicles of cohesion--the political parties, and this trend shows no sign of ceasing."

The CSAE director pointed to the proliferation of political consultants and attack ads, saying they contributed to "undermining, distorting and trivializing the political dialog."

"What is happening in the political marketplace," he

continued, "bears no resemblance to the free exercise of speech.... Given the way campaigns are currently conducted and the resultant images of our leaders which are flashed across the screen for one to two hours every day on every major broadcast outlet, it is a wonder that anybody has sufficient respect for the political enterprise to vote."

Gans suggested that neither the Democrats nor the Republicans are interested in reversing the decline in voter participation. On the contrary, both have a vested interest in discouraging masses of people from turning out to the polls. The CSAE report asserted that this Tuesday's election "nailed the coffin on the belief that low turnout benefits the GOP," noting that Democrats won in states like California and New York where turnout was substantially down, while contests in the two states which had the greatest turnout increases, Kentucky and Minnesota, were won by a Republican and an independent.

"We seem to have had an election in which each party, in the pursuit of winning, designed its tactics to pull out its core supporters while leaving the vast majority of the electorate standing on the sidelines," Gans said.

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The \$1 billion election

By Jerry White

According to preliminary figures from the Federal Election Committee and nonpartisan groups that monitor campaign spending, the 1998 elections were the first billion-dollar congressional vote. Democratic and Republican politicians spent more than \$500 million on their campaigns, while business interests, Political Action Committees and unions spent an equivalent sum.

California's elections alone cost \$250 million, to pay for campaign advertising not only in the gubernatorial, Senate and 52 House races, but for a series of ballot propositions. Gambling, electric and tobacco companies spent \$155 million on Propositions 5, 9 and 10 on the state ballot. Proposition 10, a 50 cents a pack tax on cigarettes to finance early childhood programs, passed narrowly despite \$28 million in negative ads by tobacco interests, while Proposition 9, which would have rolled back the deregulation of electric utilities, was crushed by \$40 million in negative advertising. Nearly \$90 million was spent on both sides on the

referendum to expand Indian gaming.

Nationwide the congressional Republicans raised over \$300 million for their own campaigns, and the congressional Democrats raised \$200 million. In only a handful of races, as in New York and California, were these vast sums deployed against each other. Most of the money was raised for incumbents who had only token opposition.

According to one study, only 13 percent of House members faced financially competitive races. Two thirds of incumbents had margins of 10 to 1 or better over their opponents in terms of PAC contributions. House Speaker Newt Gingrich spent 650 times as much money as his Democratic challenger.

See Also:

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[5 November 1998]



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