

Reply to Gans

The Turnout Numerator

Both Curtis Gans and I agree on the need for examining complete returns. However, the prematurely released 1996 figures in CSAE's post-election report for California, Oregon, and Washington fell 4, 29, and 12 percentage points short, respectively, of turnouts calculated from official presidential votes divided by VAP. They also fell 9, 30, and 14 percentage points short of Burnham's figures, which we both agree are superior to those calculated using the VAP. Thus, Gans exceeds the 1 to 3 percentage point margin of error noted for state turnouts in the 1996 CSAE report.

We also agree that the presidential vote should continue to be the main basis for longitudinal turnout studies. But since the vast majority of states now provide figures for total ballots cast and because almost 1.5 million voters abstained from voting for president in 1996, these votes should be included in turnout calculations and successions of contemporary elections and turnout trends.

Table 1
Adjusted Voter Turnout

	Presidential Turnout	Total Turnout
Arizona	50	51
California	55	57
Florida	55	57
Illinois	54	55
Maryland	51	51
Massachusetts	58	59
Michigan	57	58
New Jersey	58	59
New York	54	55
Pennsylvania	50	50
Texas	48	48
Virginia	50	51
Washington	59	60
United States	53.3	54.1

Note: This table adds naturalized immigrants to the eligible electorate totals in Table 2 of my article. They were the most recent data available for the states. All data are from fiscal 1996. These are the US Immigration and Naturalization Service's "Workload data." They are preliminary, and subject to revision.

Changes to the state-level data to reflect those living abroad were not possible due to inadequacies in the living-abroad data.

The Turnout Denominator

Gans' observation that 1.1 million people naturalized in 1996 should be added to my electorate figure is correct. So, too, should the 430,000 military personnel, their voting age dependents, and non-military government employees living abroad that Gans' details in endnote 4 of his article. After these adjustments, the revised turnout figures for the nation are—US, 54.1% using total votes cast as the numerator, and 53.3% using those casting a vote for president as the numerator (see Table 1).

The remaining 2.5 million Gans mistakenly asserts should be added to my calculations would double-count persons in the Census' VAP and my eligible electorate figures. This 2.5 million figure originates from the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs. It counts the total number of Americans registered at US Consulates around the world, the vast majority of whom are tourists, students, and persons living abroad for a few weeks, months, or years, who were already enumerated by the Census. It also includes a minority who live permanently overseas and have not been enumerated. Officials in the Census Bureau and State Department admit there are no good statistics on this, but roughly estimate this population at no more than 500,000, and probably closer to 200,000 (i.e., what it was in 1990). This estimate is approximately equal to *and thus canceled out* by the US institutionalized mental health population which is also included in the VAP.

Regarding the census undercount, Gans needs to estimate how many of these 3 million are ineligible to vote because they are not US citizens or have been barred from voting due to felony convictions. I suspect a significant portion of this undercount would be ineligible.

And, contrary to Gans, I contend, that a valid determination of the number of ineligible felons in each state, for most felon subpopulations, can be made from the sources listed in Table 2, Note 3 of my article.

In summary, the VAP should be purged of ineligible, and fuller tallies are needed before reporting state turnouts, especially from the West. Hopefully, this discussion will spur such changes. Regardless of the criticisms I have raised, CSAE has served the public well in the past. Additionally, the trend toward a declining voter turnout that CSAE has traced over many years is real and disturbing. Perhaps this exchange will lead to some methodological changes that will further enhance public awareness of the turnout problem.

—Peter Bruce