

Voter turnout is the number of voters who submit a ballot, and it is one of the most important statistics people want to know for any election. Citizens who turn out to vote not only determine who received the most votes, but also the level of voter participation: what share of eligible voters actually voted (i.e., voter turnout).

Overall Count and Turnout

The Election Assistance Commission (EAC) study found slightly more than 82 million ballots were cast or counted in the 2006 election, a number that may be lower than some other sources have reported—perhaps because not all local jurisdictions provided data to the EAC. (Others claim the number to be in the 85-86 million range.)

The survey developed by the EAC for 2006 sought, through two sets of questions, to determine the various components of voter turnout in the election. The questions were designed to find out the numbers for ballots cast and the number of ballots counted for persons who vote in polling places, by absentee ballots, via early voting or by provisional ballots. Not all States kept both sets of data, and because there was no single question seeking the total number of persons who participated in the election, a separate maximum number of ballots cast or counted was created for this report. This represents the “maximum votes cast/counted” column in table A.

Academics, experts and other groups look at turnout as a percentage of voting age population or citizen voting age population to develop a single number that depicts the state of the democratic process. On the other hand, many election officials calculate turnout as a percentage of the registered voters in a jurisdiction recognizing that the election process is a multi-step event (i.e., a person has to be of voting age, then they have to be registered, and finally they have to vote). Both sets of turnout calculations are shown in table A.

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and Maine (64 percent) leading the States. Their neighbor, Massachusetts, reported the lowest percentage (7.1 percent), mainly due to the data missing from parts of the State. Low percentages in other States were also the result of missing data.

When turnout is calculated as a percentage of registered voters, the nationwide average for 2006 was 47.5 percent. Wyoming led the nation, reporting 79.9 percent of its registered voters participated in the election. Wyoming was followed by Vermont (72.9 percent), Oregon (71.2 percent) and South Dakota (71.0 percent).

How Americans Vote

Voters can cast their ballots in a variety of ways. The traditional method is by voting in person at a polling place on election day. Over the years, however, innovations have increased the methods available to citizens who want to cast a ballot. Today, voters who do not want to go to the polling place on election day may not require an excuse (“no excuse absentee balloting”) and in some States, can be placed on a “permanent” absentee list. These voters receive and cast their ballots through the mail. All voters in Oregon and most voters in Washington State cast their ballot this way. In the 2006 election, only three counties in Washington State were not fully “vote by mail.”

In other States, the voter may have the option to show up prior to the day of the election at a county office, a library, or a convenience store (in some States), and cast a ballot. This is usually called

Table A. Key Voting Statistics in the States*

State	Citizen Voting Age Population (CVAP)	Reported Registered Voters	Percent Registered of CVAP	Maximum Votes Cast/ Counted	Turnout Rate (Percent of CVAP)	Turnout Rate (Percent of Registered)	Number of Jurisdictions	Number of Polling Places	Number of Precincts
Alabama	3,406,000	2,469,807	72.5%	1,164,433	34.2%	47.1%	67	0	2,541
Alaska	468,000	466,258	99.6%	239,809	51.2%	51.4%	1	439	439
Arizona	3,974,000	2,568,401	64.6%	1,583,724	39.9%	61.7%	15	1,954	2,209
Arkansas	2,050,000	1,615,271	78.8%	778,228	38.0%	48.2%	75	1,741	2,752
California	21,847,000	15,837,108	72.5%	9,138,131	41.8%	57.7%	58	14,726	25,366
Colorado	3,293,000	3,000,836	91.1%	1,598,728	48.5%	53.3%	64	0	0
Connecticut	2,474,000	1,941,467	78.5%	1,168,856	47.2%	60.2%	8	779	1,377
Delaware	614,000	557,736	90.8%	258,928	42.2%	46.4%	3	279	436
District of Columbia	421,000	395,926	94.0%	124,228	29.5%	31.4%	1	142	142
Florida	12,410,000	10,433,148	84.1%	4,879,116	39.3%	46.8%	67	5,528	6,925
Georgia	6,392,000	4,408,840	69.0%	2,156,271	33.7%	48.9%	159	3,003	3,003
Hawaii	912,000	662,728	72.7%	460,558	50.5%	69.5%	4	265	353
Idaho	1,025,000	764,880	74.6%	460,045	44.9%	60.1%	44	921	895
Illinois	8,727,000	7,375,688	84.5%	3,593,356	41.2%	48.7%	110	8,342	11,615
Indiana	4,586,000	4,295,687	93.7%	1,734,428	37.8%	40.4%	92	3,891	5,604
Iowa	2,205,000	2,077,239	94.2%	1,312,702	59.5%	63.2%	99	1,826	1,826
Kansas	1,973,000	1,663,017	84.3%	867,320	44.0%	52.2%	105	1,571	3,290
Kentucky	3,144,000	2,766,288	88.0%	1,370,462	43.6%	49.5%	120	2,640	3,634
Louisiana	3,139,000	2,890,891	92.1%	952,985	30.4%	33.0%	64	2,156	3,960
Maine	1,022,000	993,748	97.2%	653,580	64.0%	65.8%	16	584	584
Maryland	3,919,000	3,142,591	80.2%	1,809,237	46.2%	57.6%	24	1,591	1,793
Massachusetts	4,552,000	3,990,505	87.7%	321,780	7.1%	8.1%	14	0	131
Michigan	7,345,000	7,180,778	97.8%	3,756,337	51.1%	52.3%	83	3,785	5,218
Minnesota	3,747,000	3,118,398	83.2%	2,074,465	55.4%	66.5%	87	4,255	4,320
Mississippi	2,124,000	1,778,245	83.7%	498,531	23.5%	28.0%	82	1,630	1,677
Missouri	4,330,000	4,007,174	92.5%	2,186,476	50.5%	54.6%	116	3,234	5,097
Montana	719,000	649,436	90.3%	414,603	57.7%	63.8%	56	558	870
Nebraska	1,264,000	1,138,422	90.1%	613,222	48.5%	53.9%	93	1,281	1,642
Nevada	1,592,000	991,054	62.3%	588,539	37.0%	59.4%	17	508	1,912
New Hampshire	981,000	848,317	86.5%	417,436	42.6%	49.2%	10	309	332
New Jersey	5,818,000	4,848,956	83.3%	1,422,257	24.4%	29.3%	21	2,990	4,679
New Mexico	1,325,000	1,088,977	82.2%	315,452	23.8%	29.0%	33	724	1,096
New York	12,949,000	11,669,573	90.1%	4,974,114	38.4%	42.6%	58	6,477	16,309
North Carolina	6,307,000	5,567,424	88.3%	2,098,991	33.3%	37.7%	100	2,820	2,820
North Dakota	486,000	N/A	N/A	220,812	45.4%	N/A	53	491	567
Ohio	8,516,000	7,860,052	92.3%	4,382,889	51.5%	55.8%	88	6,153	11,124
Oklahoma	2,581,000	2,075,561	80.4%	934,329	36.2%	45.0%	77	2,089	2,143
Oregon	2,638,000	1,976,669	74.9%	1,406,561	53.3%	71.2%	36	36	1,416
Pennsylvania	9,349,000	8,182,876	87.5%	3,040,133	32.5%	37.2%	67	7,879	7,949
Rhode Island	762,000	682,344	89.5%	388,339	51.0%	56.9%	5	565	565
South Carolina	3,177,000	2,452,718	77.2%	1,090,784	34.3%	44.5%	46	2,044	2,253
South Dakota	579,000	503,086	86.9%	356,990	61.7%	71.0%	66	641	819
Tennessee	4,454,000	3,738,703	83.9%	1,868,363	41.9%	50.0%	95	2,067	2,146
Texas	14,727,000	13,074,279	88.8%	4,115,528	27.9%	31.5%	254	0	8,360
Utah	1,629,000	1,302,405	80.0%	593,244	36.4%	45.5%	29	1,657	2,247
Vermont	479,000	433,569	90.5%	316,137	66.0%	72.9%	14	265	286
Virginia	5,447,000	4,555,940	83.6%	2,399,152	44.0%	52.7%	134	2,465	2,429
Washington	4,482,000	3,264,511	72.8%	2,136,420	47.7%	65.4%	39	682	6,630
West Virginia	1,419,000	1,137,371	80.2%	462,833	32.6%	40.7%	55	1,686	1,905
Wisconsin	4,120,000	3,543,725	86.0%	2,162,438	52.5%	61.0%	72	2,742	3,565
Wyoming	387,000	263,083	68.0%	210,319	54.3%	79.9%	23	330	487
American Samoa	0**	14,283	N/A	13,273	N/A	92.9%	1	45	17
Guam	0**	0	N/A	0	N/A	N/A	1	0	0
Puerto Rico	0**	0	N/A	0	N/A	N/A	1	0	0
Virgin Islands	0**	53,017	N/A	35,539	N/A	67.0%	1	53	29
TOTAL	206,286,000	172,805,006	83.8%	82,121,411	39.8%	47.5%	3,123	112,839	179,784

*Responses may not include all jurisdictions.

**Census Bureau does not generate estimates for territories.

“in person early voting” or sometimes “in person absentee voting.” Finally, in a small number of States, including Colorado and some locations in Indiana, citizens can cast their ballots at a “vote center”—essentially any designated location in the county (often conveniently located near highways or in shopping centers) where any voter from the county can come to vote. Some vote centers are open before the election, while others are only available on election day.

Voters also have the option of casting a provisional ballot if their eligibility to vote is questioned or challenged. Provisional ballots protect a citizen’s right to vote even if there are bureaucratic problems with the registration record. Protecting the right to cast a provisional ballot was perceived by many as an important part of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA).

While there is a significant level of uncertainty in the data reported from the States because of missing information, jurisdictions reported that ballots were cast or counted in the following ways.

- 78.4 percent (64,356,295) were cast or counted in a polling place on election day.
- 13.8 percent (11,317,719) were cast or counted as an absentee ballot by domestic civilians.
- 6.4 percent (5,271,333) were cast or counted as an early vote.
- 1.0 percent (794,348) were cast or counted as a provisional vote.
- 0.4 percent (333,179) were cast or counted by Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) voters⁶.

The number of ballots cast by the various methods is reported in table 26, while the number of ballots that were counted by these methods is reported in table 27. Not all States reported both the number of ballots cast and the number of ballots counted, so the maximum of the cast or counted data are provided in

Figure 3. Voters’ Methods of Casting a Ballot

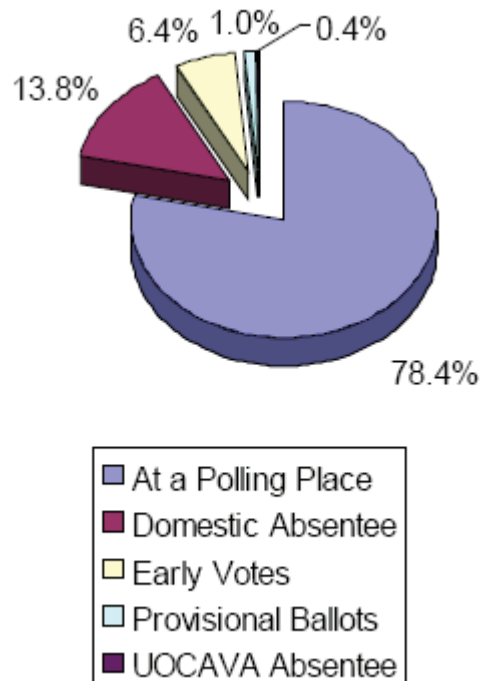
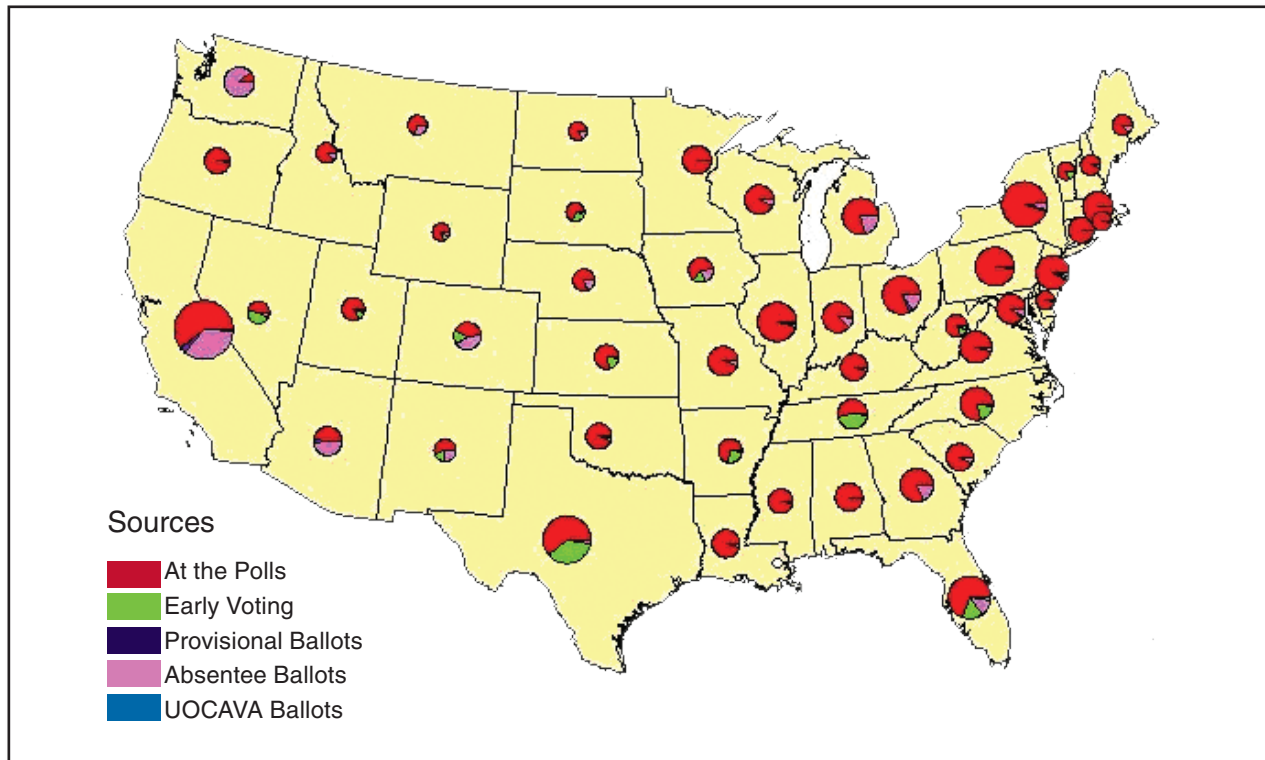


table 28a. These tables are contained in appendix B of this report, while these and other tables are included on the EAC Web site at www.eac.gov.

While nationwide voting took place predominately in a polling place on election day, there were great variations among the States. Generally, voters in the western region of the nation tended to use the absentee ballot process more, while voters in the East traditionally voted at their local polling place. But in a country as diverse as the United States, there are always a few exceptions. Iowa and Tennessee are not Western States, but both were among the highest in the share of voter turnout that was attributable to non-precinct place voting.

⁶More details on Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act voters are provided in the EAC’s UOCAVA Survey Report Findings, published September 2007, which can be found at http://www.eac.gov/News/docs/uocava-report-final-4-printing.pdf/attachment_download/file.

Figure 4. Source of Ballots - 2006 General Election



Florida also had a moderately high rate of early and absentee voting. Idaho, on the other hand, is a Western State but ranked relatively lower than its western neighbors on the number of citizens who used absentee ballots. Figure 4 shows the major components of the voting process in each State, with pie charts depicting which share of the total votes came from the various voting processes.

Absentee Voting in the States

There is a wide variation in the number of citizens who cast absentee ballots due to different absentee voting laws in the States. Twenty-nine States have “no excuse absentee balloting,” which means citizens do not have to give a reason for not voting at the precinct on election day. They only need to

ask for an absentee ballot, and one is sent to them. The other 21 States and the District of Columbia require an excuse to vote absentee by mail, such as being in the Armed Services, being away at college or on business, or being ill or incapacitated.

It should come as no surprise, then, that States allowing no-excuse absentee voting have more absentee voters. The State of Washington had the most votes cast or counted absentee with 87.8 percent, followed by Arizona with 47 percent, Colorado at 39.6 percent, and California (which previously led the nation) at 35.3 percent. States that require an excuse have much lower numbers of absentee voters, such as Delaware (3.1 percent cast or counted), Kentucky (4.6 percent), or New Jersey and New York (4.6 percent).

Reasons for Rejecting Absentee Ballots

These absentee numbers do not include voters who are covered by UOCAVA; these data were tallied separately. The survey found that only a small portion of the overall absentee ballots cast and counted primarily came from members of the Armed Services who are stationed in the United States or abroad, and also from citizens who live overseas. These voters are covered by a different set of laws than are residents who want to vote absentee. Overall, however, UOCAVA voters are a relatively small proportion of all voters—less than four-tenths of one percent of ballots cast in the 2006 general election were UOCAVA ballots.

The EAC survey sought to determine why domestic civilian absentee ballots were rejected by States and localities. Using a predefined list of reasons, the survey found that nearly 40 percent of the absentee ballots were returned as undeliverable. Undeliverable absentee ballots were the same major problem that States and jurisdictions reported for UOCAVA voters⁷. Another 19 percent of the absentee ballots were not returned in time to be counted, according to State law. Table B shows (in descending order of frequency) the reasons domestic absentee ballots were rejected in the 2006 election.

Early Voting

The EAC survey sought to describe “early voting” as “generally, any in-person voting that occurred prior to election day at specific polling locations for which there were no special eligibility requirements, and which is not considered absentee voting under the State’s definitions/requirements for absentee voting.” However, the data indicate there may have been some confusion by States and jurisdictions regarding the meaning of “early voting.”

It is possible that in many jurisdictions, large numbers of ballots may have arrived prior to election day that were not reported as “early.”⁸ For example, the State of Oregon reports that none of its citizens

Table B
Reasons for Rejecting Absentee Ballots

Ballot returned as undeliverable	129,803	37.4%
Ballot not timely received	67,065	19.3%
Other	52,500	15.1%
Ballot replaced	29,764	8.6%
No voter signature	25,690	7.3%
Non-matching signature	19,381	5.6%
Spoiled ballot	4,700	1.4%
Already voted in person	3,668	1.1%
Ballot returned in unofficial envelope	2,993	0.9%
Ineligible to vote	2,701	0.8%
Voter deceased	2,191	0.6%
No residence address on envelope	1,627	0.5%
First time voter without proper identification	1,598	0.5%
No witness signature	1,225	0.4%
Envelope not sealed	886	0.3%
Ballot missing from envelope	425	0.1%
No ballot application on record	200	0.1%
Multiple ballots returned in one envelope	136	0.0%
No election official’s signature on ballot	59	0.0%
Total Rejected	346,612	100.0%

cast a ballot prior to election day, even though the State only uses vote-by-mail, and all ballots are counted on election day.⁹ Twenty-three States and one territory reported information on early voting. Most of these jurisdictions also reported separate data for domestic civilian absentee voting.

⁷See EAC’s UOCAVA survey at <http://www.eac.gov/clearinghouse/2006-uniformed-and-overseas-citizens-voting-act-survey-and-conference-materials/>.

⁸Many States do not report the date that an absentee ballot was processed; therefore, these data were not collected in the survey.

⁹On the Oregon State Web site (http://www.sos.State.or.us/elections/ballot_return_history.pdf), 70-85% of ballots were bar coded and scanned by county election officials prior to election day.

In general, States that allow for absentee voting with few restrictions (“no excuse”) reported high numbers of absentee ballots and low numbers of early voters. These include Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Michigan, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, and Washington. Other States reported “early voting” as a separate and distinct category from “absentee voting,” such as Arkansas, Florida, Kansas, Nevada, North Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, and West Virginia.

Nevada had the highest share of its total ballots cast coming from early votes with 41.6 percent, followed by Texas with 36.2 percent and Arkansas at 24.3 percent. Tennessee does not keep track of ballots cast, but did report that 45.5 percent of its ballots counted were early votes.

Votes Cast and Votes Counted: How They Differ

Just because a ballot is cast does not necessarily mean the ballot is counted. “Casting a ballot” generally means the voter fills out a machine-readable form (to be read by an optical scan machine), enters his or her choice on an electronic voting machine, fills out a traditional hand-counted paper ballot, or uses a mechanical lever machine.

Table 26 in appendix B details the number of ballots cast, as reported by the States, while table 27 details the number of ballots counted. Tables 28a, 28b, and 28c compare the two, showing the percentage of ballots counted as a proportion of ballots cast for each category. In table 28a, for example, if the number is 100 percent, that means that a State reported the same number of ballots counted as cast. Lower numbers mean that, for some reason, the number of ballots counted is less than those cast.

Incomplete data reporting on the part of States—in particular, discrepancies between the number of jurisdictions for which data were provided on “ballots counted” and the number for which data were provided on “ballots cast”—makes it hard to draw any

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firm conclusions from the survey. In addition, some States don’t keep track of the two separate numbers and only report ballots cast or ballots counted, and coverage frequently varied across all jurisdictions in any State. That is, some local jurisdictions may have reported only those cast, while others reported only those counted, which resulted in offsetting numbers when the data is summed to the State level.

In general, the number of ballots counted of those cast for in-precinct voting is very high—averaging over 97.3 percent nationwide. The number of absentee ballots counted of cast is also quite high, averaging over 90.1 percent. It is possible the actual numbers are even higher than reported, because many States with low percentages of those ballots counted that were cast did not provide complete information. For example, table 28a shows that just 86.4 percent of ballots cast “at the polls” were counted for the State of Arkansas. In table 26, however, 69 counties in the State reported how many ballots were cast, while table 27 shows only 59 reported how many were counted.

The most reliable statistic is the overall total in the middle of table 28a, which details the overall percentage of ballots counted as a percentage of those cast, and most States reported numbers in excess of 99 percent. The nationwide average is 96.7 percent. States that reported figures below 95 percent (e.g., Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Texas, and West Virginia) have inconsistencies in the manner in which data were collected and reported.