Notes

1. Turnout defined: Turnout should be a simple calculation - the number of eligible citizens who voted divided by the number of eligible citizens. In presidential election year general elections, the numerator is the votes cast for president, mindful that all who cast ballots do not necessarily vote for president and occasionally the vote for a governor or U.S. Senator exceeds the vote for president in a state. There are also blank ballots and mutilated ballots, but since many states have no historical record of counting the total number of ballots cast, the most consistent denominator is the presidential vote for which there are records by state and nation from the first election in 1788 to the present. The numerator for primaries is more complex, since some states have, in any given year, primaries in only one party and some states have no statewide primaries (this year five - Alaska, Colorado, Idaho, Iowa and Kansas). For primaries, the numerator the Center for the Study of the American Electorate and its partner, the Bipartisan Policy Center, uses is that statewide race which has the most votes cast. Separate charts are also provided for the overall and partisan primary votes for president, governor and U.S. Senator in this report.

The denominator - those eligible to vote - has been a source of contention in some academic circles. What is not in contention is that in order to vote a person must be of age (18 years or older) and must be a citizen. It is the standard used in the report. Since the founding of the Republic the decennial census provided an accounting of those age-eligible to vote (it was not always 18 and over and not always uniform in all states) and from 1870 through 2000, with the exception of the census of 1960, the census enumerated those residing in the several states who were not citizens. One could, after each decennial census, subtract the non-citizens of age from the total age-eligible population, emerge with a citizen eligible figure and interpolate between censuses for denominators for the intervening years. The decennial census of 2010 only provided the number of those age-eligible, but the American Community Survey of the Census Bureau, published biennially, provides a non-citizen estimate from its survey. Thus, for the 2012 election, this report (and subsequent ones) CSAE/BPC uses the age-eligible figures from the 2010 Census, minus the estimated non-citizens in the 2010 American Community Survey and interpolates forward from 2010 based on the rate of change of the citizen age-eligible population between 2000 and 2010. An updated American Community survey will be published this month that may provide some revision to the denominators included in this report. This report is based on an interpolation between Censuses - or in recent times from April to April. The Center for the Study of the American Electorate has also interpolated from November to November, a figure that will be used in its general election reports.

There are many other factors that affect the denominator of age-eligible citizens. With few exceptions, convicted felons serving prison sentences and many ex-felons who have served their time can’t vote but are included in those age-eligible. The problem with correcting for
their number is that the laws affecting their enfranchisement are subject to changes, many between one election and the next, and accurate data for the number of disenfranchised felons and ex-felons is not available beyond a certain number of years, making historical comparisons of their impact on the eligible vote difficult. People in mental institutions who are deemed incompetent cannot vote, though they are included in the figure of age-eligible persons. But no one has accurate data on how many are so deemed. American citizens residing in places other than the United States are not included in the Census enumeration, despite the fact that they can vote. While it possible to allocate those living outside the United States in government and the military to the states from whence they came, it is impossible to accurately estimate overall the balance of those residing outside of the U.S. or allocate them to states for voting purposes. People who are naturalized in the year of the election are not included in the biennial estimate of the eligible, and their numbers cannot be accurately determined until months after the election. People who move also affect state and national denominators, but their number also cannot be accurately ascertained until after the election. In addition, the estimated undercounts and overcounts in Census enumerations can also affect the denominator. For all of these reasons CSAE/BPC has chosen to use the citizen age-eligible denominator, as the most accurate way of determining turnout and the one that has the greatest present and historical validity.

2. The turnout figures contained in this report for the primaries of 2012 are final and official. All the turnout figures from previous elections are final and official and compared with more than one reputable source. All comparisons are for the presidential election years from 1972 through 2012. The year 1972 was the starting point for proliferation of primaries due to the rules changes then adopted by the Democratic Party as recommended by the McGovern/Fraser reform commission. The Republican Party largely followed the Democrats lead when it came to primaries and schedule, although the GOP had a smaller number of primaries in 1972.

3. There is one anomaly in this report due to the way CSAE’s database is programmed for primary turnout. Charts that are labeled total turnout include those states with primaries in both parties. In five states - New York, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah and Virginia - there was only a Republican primary in 2012. Those figures are included in the individual partisan charts for presidential, gubernatorial and senatorial primaries.

4. There are too many to thank for making this report possible, but some include John Fortier, Eric Larson and the leadership of the Bipartisan Policy Center: Samuel Schreiber who many years ago designed a custom database program that makes my analysis possible; to a series of research assistants the most recent of which are Matthew Mulling and Mark Harvey; the many state election officials who provided information and data and Dr. Walter Dean Burnham who provided the wisdom and methodology that made the work and analysis of CSAE sound.

5. The analysis and conclusions in this report is the responsibility of Curtis Gans, CSAE’s director.