

Motor Voters Start Arriving What Changes Will They Bring?

by Bill Daly

Hawaii's Motor Voter law took effect in May, 1992. Under this law people can register to vote when they obtain a new driver's license or modify an old one. By studying the 40 months before Motor Voter went into effect and the first 18 months after Motor Voter (1/1/89 through 10/31/93) we can gain some understanding of the effect Motor Voter is having on Hawaii's electorate, and what changes might be expected in the future.

ELECTION "SEASON" REGISTRATION

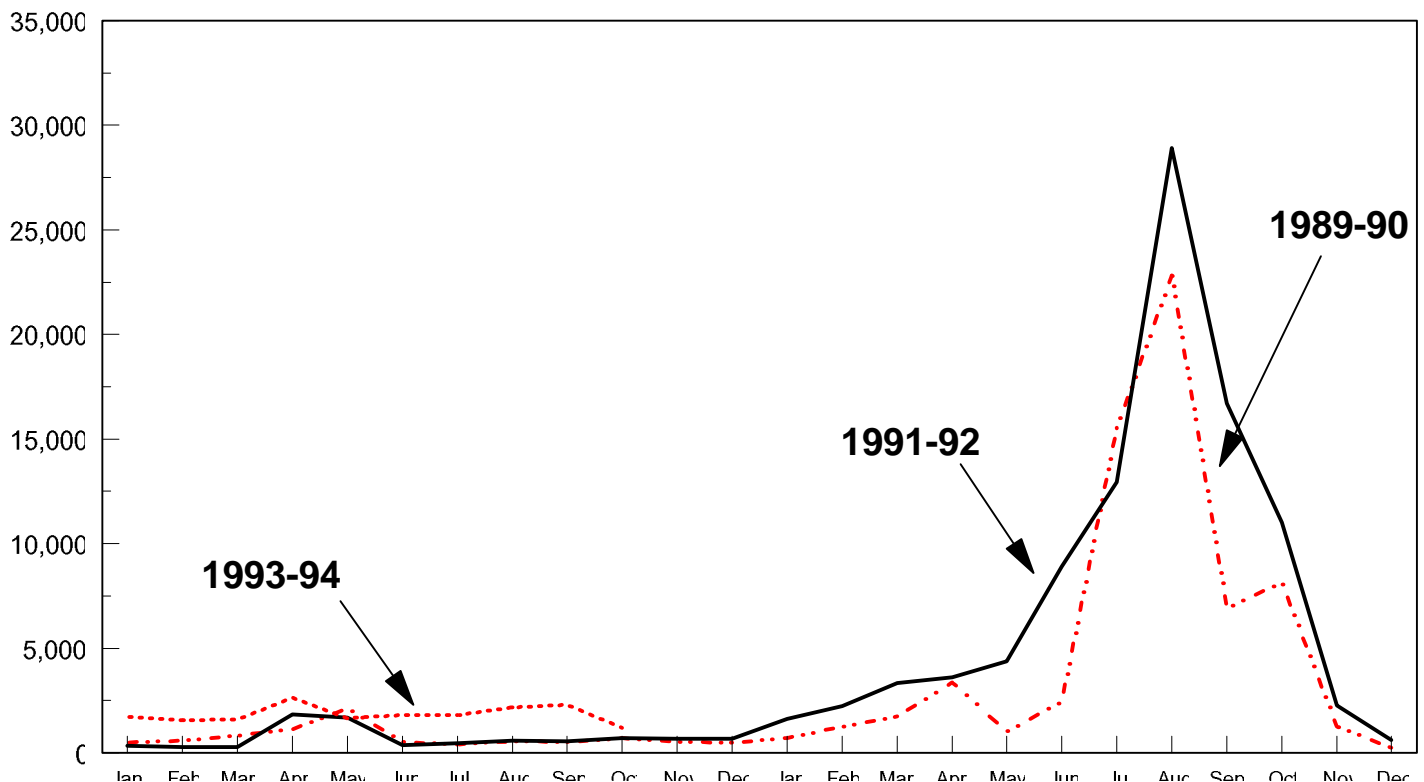
Historically in Hawaii most voter registration has taken place during an Election "Season" of just over four months, from June 1 until the "close" of registration in early October, 30 days before the November General Election. Approximately 75% of the voters who register during a two year period do so in that short span. In 1990, 55,871 people registered to vote in that period, out of a total of 74,262 in the two year period to the 1990 General Election.

In 1992, there were 78,463 registrants in the period, out of 104,986 total. In both cases that was almost exactly 75% of the registrants for the two year period.

There are a variety of influences that cause people to register during this period. Publicity concerning the upcoming elections is substantially increased in all forms of media. The Lt Governor's office steps up the voter registration activities of their office. Individual candidates, campaigns and political organizations all over the state are working to register their friends and supporters, sometimes in massive, well organized and well funded operations.

Looking at this concentration of activity another way, in the four year period from 1/1/89 through 12/31/92, an average of 1,182 people per month registered outside the Election Season, while 13,433 per month registered during the Election Season.

Figure I - Statewide Hawaii Voter Registration by Month



WHAT EFFECT HAS MOTOR VOTER HAD SO FAR?

The effects of Motor Voter are shown clearly by considering the period from 11/1/92 through 10/31/93. Motor Voter was in effect during this entire 12 month period and a total of 21,258 people registered, or 1,772/month. Registration in this particular period is generally lower than average. In 89-90 and 91-92 this period averaged only 717 new registrations per month. This would imply that since the 1992 General Election the Motor Voter program has been adding about 1,000 new registrants a month over the level of those who registered previously.

If this continues over the full 24 month election cycle we might expect something in the neighborhood of 24,000 additional voters to be registered through the Motor Voter program by the time of the 1994 election. This many additional registrants would have increased the new registration by 32.3% for the 1990 General Election, or by 22.9% for the 1992 General Election. It would have increased the total voters registered for the General Election by about 5% in either year. This assumes, of course, that none of these 24,000 people would have been otherwise registered during the Election Season Registration. Certainly some would have, so this is a maximum effect.

This registration data by month is shown graphically in Figure I, Statewide Hawaii Voter Registration by Month. The data is developed from the year and month of the individual voter registration dates on the official General Election "final cutoff" files issue by the counties for the 1990 and 1992 General Elections. Counts of total eligible registered voters on these tapes vary slightly from the official returns of the elections later reported by the Lt Governor's Office.

In a non-Presidential year the Primary is generally of more interest than in the Presidential year, with the Governor and Lt. Governor on the Primary Ballot. Notice in the Figure I graph that voter registration was much lower in the period following the Primary in 1989-90, the interest in the general being much less than in the Presidential year. This despite the fact that a heated US Senate General Election campaign was in progress in 1990.

It is interesting to note that the total number of registered voters does not grow rapidly, despite the large numbers of new registrants. Hawaii has a very tough purge law, anyone failing to vote in either the even year Primary or General Election can be purged. Although about 175,000 people registered to vote during the 1989-92 period, a total of about 155,000 were purged for failure to vote over this period, so total registered voters grew by only about 20,000. Registration alone will not bring more citizen participation in elections, unless people are also motivated to come to the polls on election day in greater numbers than in the past.

WILL TURNOUT CHANGE?

As the above numbers show, getting people registered is one thing -- getting them to actually turnout and vote is another. More registration without more people actually voting just lowers the percentage turnout without any real benefit. It is often said that barriers to registration inhibit voting, and making it easier to register will bring more people to the polls. Let's consider how the election year registrants in the 1989-92 period turned out to vote in the elections that they registered for.

The statewide turnout in the 1990 General Election was 79%, while those who registered in the 1989-90 period turned out at a 67% rate in the General. In 1992 the statewide turnout in the General Election was 83% but the new registrants turned out at only a 74% rate in the General.

Many find this a surprising result -- people who register in the year of the election are actually less likely to vote than those who were registered and had voted in the past, but it is a consistent fact of campaign life. Occasionally the turnout rate of new registrants will be about the same as the overall average, but it never exceeds it unless the purge is nearly nonexistent. People register to vote for a variety of reasons, sometimes just to satisfy a friend who is actively registering people to vote. Making the effort to come out on election day is a different matter, even for recent registrants.

ARE ELECTION SEASON REGISTRANTS DIFFERENT?

We have already noted the two different groups of new registrants, those who register during the Election Season and those who register during the other 20 months of the cycle. Are their turnout patterns different? Since we know who voted on an individual voter basis we can track turnout rate by month of registration. Those figures have been calculated for the 46 month period from 1/1/89 thru 10/31/92, and the values plotted in Figure II, Hawaii Percent Turnout versus Month Registered.

Turnout here specifically means "not purged", that is voted in either the Primary or the General election of the period of registration. Again, figures are calculated from the General Election Cutoff files, with the specific information about who was not purged posted back from the later issued "purge file". These figures are higher than the General Election turnout rates mentioned above, in 1990 77% of new registrants voted in either the Primary or the General, while in 1992 76% voted in either the Primary or the General.

This graph shows a clear and surprising result. Generally, the closer you registered to the General Election the more likely you were to turnout and vote. There are a few little ups and downs, but both trends are clearly up, rising from the 50 to 60% range in January of the odd year to a high of over 80% for those registered in August, September and October. Remarkably, this is higher than overall turnout in some cases. These late registrants were evidently paying attention to the campaigns and they followed through in high numbers and showed up on election day!

In fact if we compare this with the average turnout rates of all new registrants from above, only the August-October registrants exceeded those average rates, all other months were below. The lower than average turnout of new registrants was totally due to those who had registered early in the cycle, before the Election Season.

It is interesting to note in each year there is a upward blip of registration in the April-May period. Presumably this corresponds to some sort of registration drive, possibly an effort in the high schools right before graduation. Comparing this with the turnout graph we see a corresponding downward turnout blip. Unfortunately the County Clerks are no longer releasing age on the voter registration tapes, so we are not able to make more detailed studies of these new registrants by age.

We have two different indicators that people registered by the Motor Voter program are going to have a lower than average turnout rate, maybe quite a bit lower. First we notice that people who register outside the Election Season always have a lower overall turnout rate than those who register during the period. Secondly we note that those who evidently registered in an April-May program every year also have a lower overall turnout rate. Motor Voter should raise total election participation slightly, but overall those who vote will likely fall as a percentage of those who are registered.

WHAT WILL THE FUTURE BRING?

The main thing that the future is going to bring is The National Voter Registration Act of 1993. This act has been widely associated with Motor Voter, and it will bring mandated Motor Voter nationally, but that alone will now have little effect in Hawaii, we already have Motor Voter. There are some other provisions for registration at different official agencies, but it is unlikely that the sum of those registrations will be as great as Motor Voter alone.

The main difference for Hawaii in the Act is the drastic limitations on purging. Purging for simple failure to vote will no longer be allowed. There are requirements that local election officials take substantial steps to rid their files of "deadwood", people who simply are no longer at the addresses where they are registered. But people who still live where they registered and simply don't vote are going to stay on the registration rolls for a long time.

This Act, which is expected to take effect in 1996 seems destined to cause the total registered voters in Hawaii to begin a rapid climb

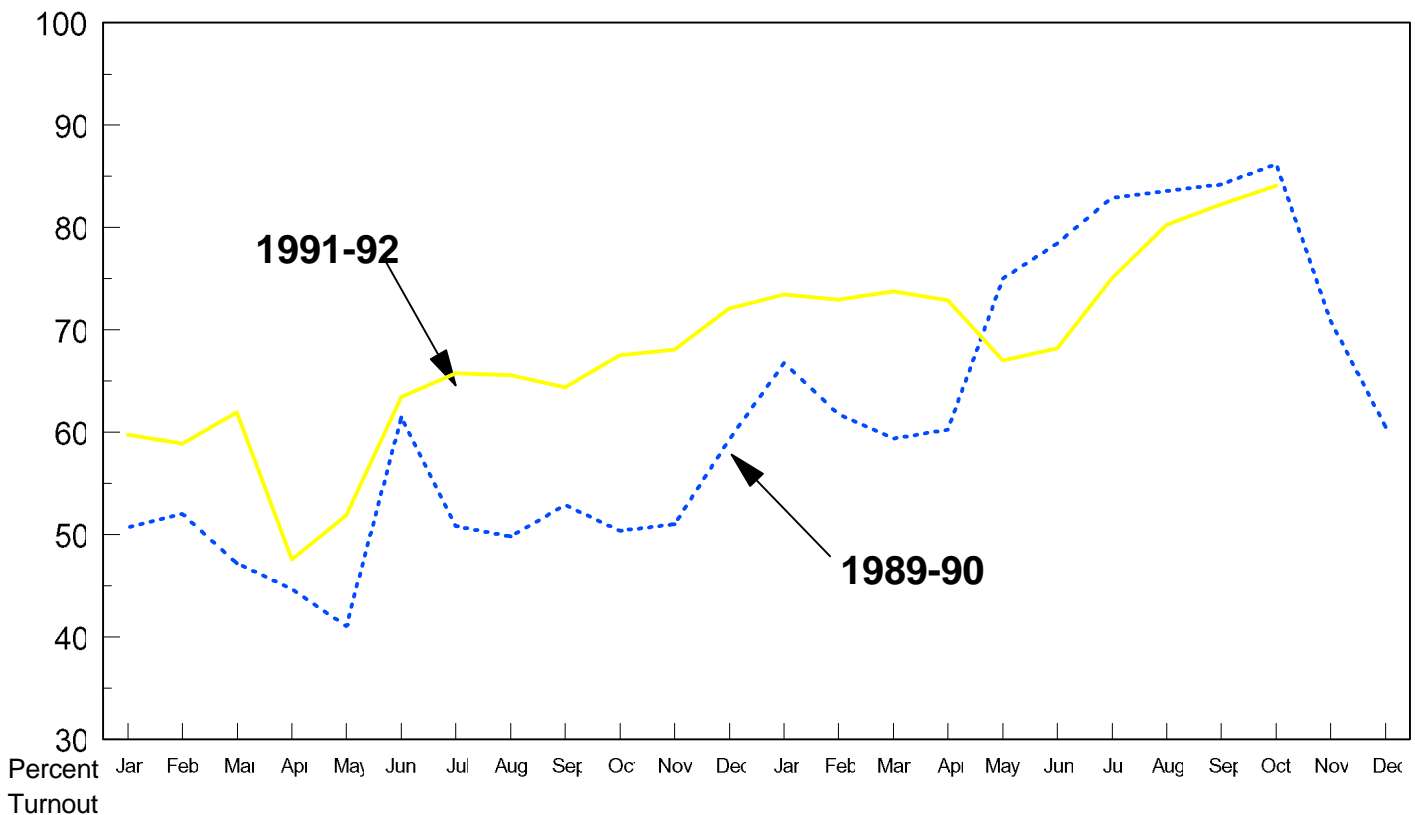
from 1996 on. Hawaii now has one of the toughest purge laws in the nation, and through this law has maintained a low percentage of eligible population registered, but a high percentage of those registered who actually vote, especially in primary elections.

The Hawaii purge system also places a premium on voter registration in the Election Season, these people play a major and important role in determining the elections. In this future this role may be substantially diminished. It is hard to develop figures on how many of the people registered during these periods have been registered before and have been purged simply for not voting, and how many are truly new registrants. The Clerks have some information on this subject, but the large volume of transactions makes an exact comparison difficult.

If all this takes place as planned, it is easy to see how registration activities in general will become much less important. Most eligible voters will be on the registration file, so there will be little gain in registration. Coding of who votes and who doesn't, however, will become critically important to campaigns.

VCS has a substantial amount of experience with situations of this type in areas with low primary turnout and/or weak purge systems already in place. We are the dominant supplier of registered voter information in greater New York City, and the key factor is our history file of "PRIME" voters. Our systems, especially our new STATS93 National Political Database, are geared to giving campaigns the best information on past voters, and the widest variety of products to take advantage of changes in the campaign environment. The future is arriving rapidly, and Motor Voter and the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 are a very important part of it! ☒

Figure II: Hawaii Percent Turnout versus Month Registered



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In this issue . . .

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