



## Bi-annual Voter Purge Suspended Result - a Decade of "Instant Growth"

by Bill Daly

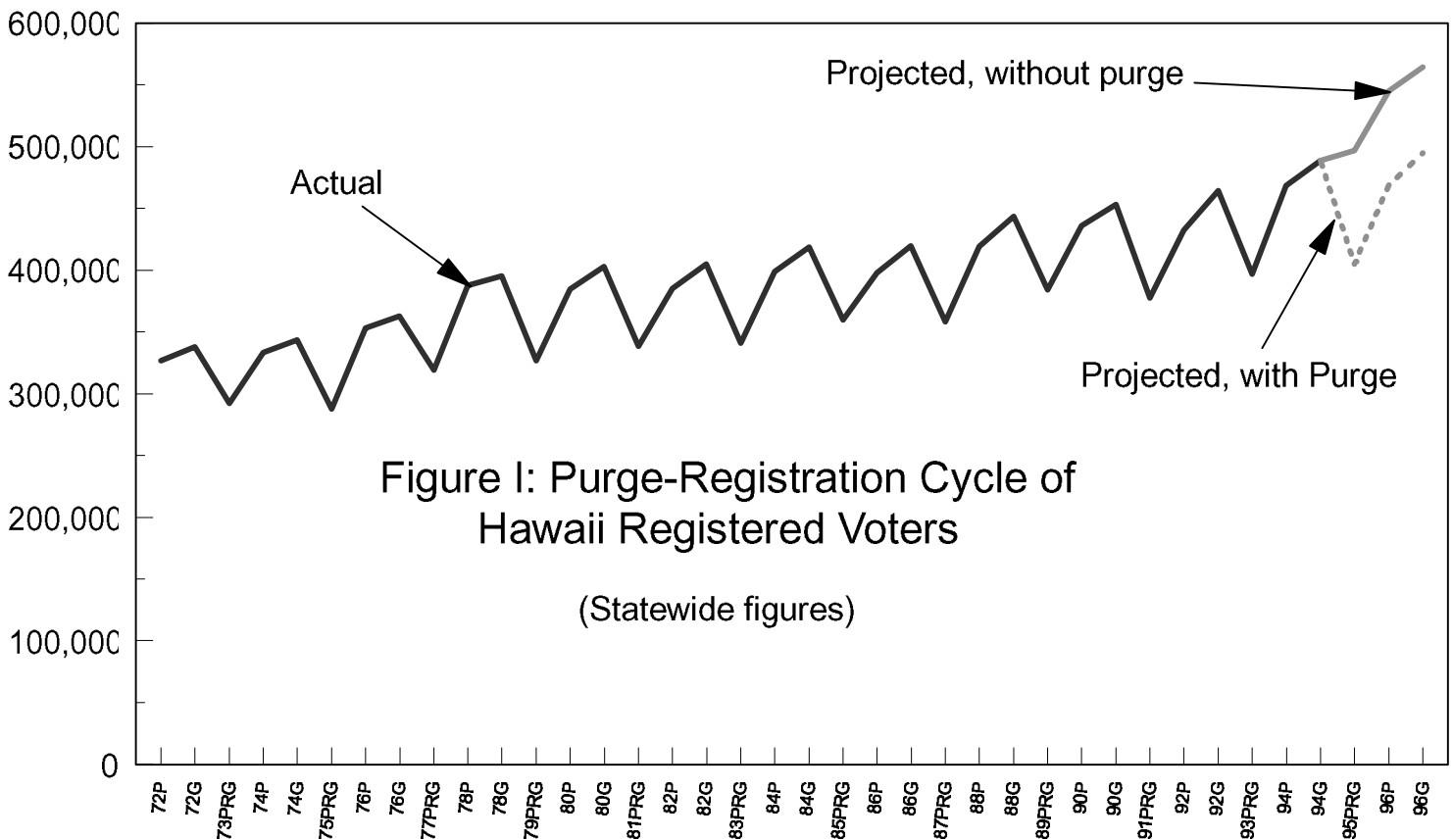
For the first time that anyone can remember, there will be no purge of Hawaii's registered voters for failure to vote in the 1994 elections. The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 and 1994 Act 119 of the Hawaii State Legislature prevent purging for simple failure to vote in any period less than four years. That means that the portion of Hawaii's 1970 law that provided for purging of anyone who failed to vote in an even year is no longer valid, and there will be no purge in 1995 for failure to vote in 1994. There can be some purging for other reasons, failure to live at the registered address, etc., but the simple purge of non-voters will not happen this year.

The graph below, *Figure I: Purge-Registration Cycle of Hawaii Registered Voters*, shows exactly how voter registration has ebbed and flowed through the election

cycles of the last 23 years. Starting from a base of 255,053 voters who were registered after the 1971 purge, voter registration has grown to a total of 488,862 before the 1994 General Election. The trend is generally up, but during this time a total of 664,773 voters were purged, while 898,582 new voters were registered. A lot of voters are included in both groups, and undoubtedly many were registered and purged more than once during this period.

### TEN YEARS OF INSTANT "GROWTH"

For the last twenty-two years this purge has reduced the number of registered voters by an average of 15% every odd year. At the same time, voter registration has grown an average of about 16% each decade. This means that



the suspension of the purge gives us, in effect, ten years of instant growth in the number of registered voters in the state.

There could be a number of benefits from this increase in registered voters, if a substantial number of them show up to vote in future elections. But sadly, experience suggests otherwise. Once people break a habit of voting and miss two elections in a row, the chance is much higher than usual that they will not vote again in the future.

In fact, nearly half of the people who would have ordinarily have been purged -- 39,932 -- have never voted in any election. One wonders why they registered in the first place. Were they added to the rolls somewhat automatically by Motor Voter? Did they register in a High School Government class for fear of a bad grade? Were they registered by a friend or spouse or enthusiastic campaign worker, without ever having any intention of voting? Whatever the reason, they have had a chance to vote and didn't. And the chances are way below average that they will vote in 1996.

### WELL, WHAT DOES IT HURT?

Well, what does it hurt, keeping all these people around on the voter rolls? With modern computerized voter registration systems it is probably just as cheap to keep them as to purge them. The poll books are a little longer to print, but again, not expensive. And if even a few of them vote who wouldn't otherwise, that's great.

First of all, we need to realize that the numbers from now on aren't going to mean quite the same thing as they did before, because the assumptions have changed. While total voting may rise a little, the percent turnout is going to go down. And we will hear increased reports of "increased voter apathy" and "declining voter interest". While that may very well be the case, a good part of it is going to be because the voter base is substantially larger to start with, and those extra people are proven "no shows".

### COST OF MAILING UP 16%

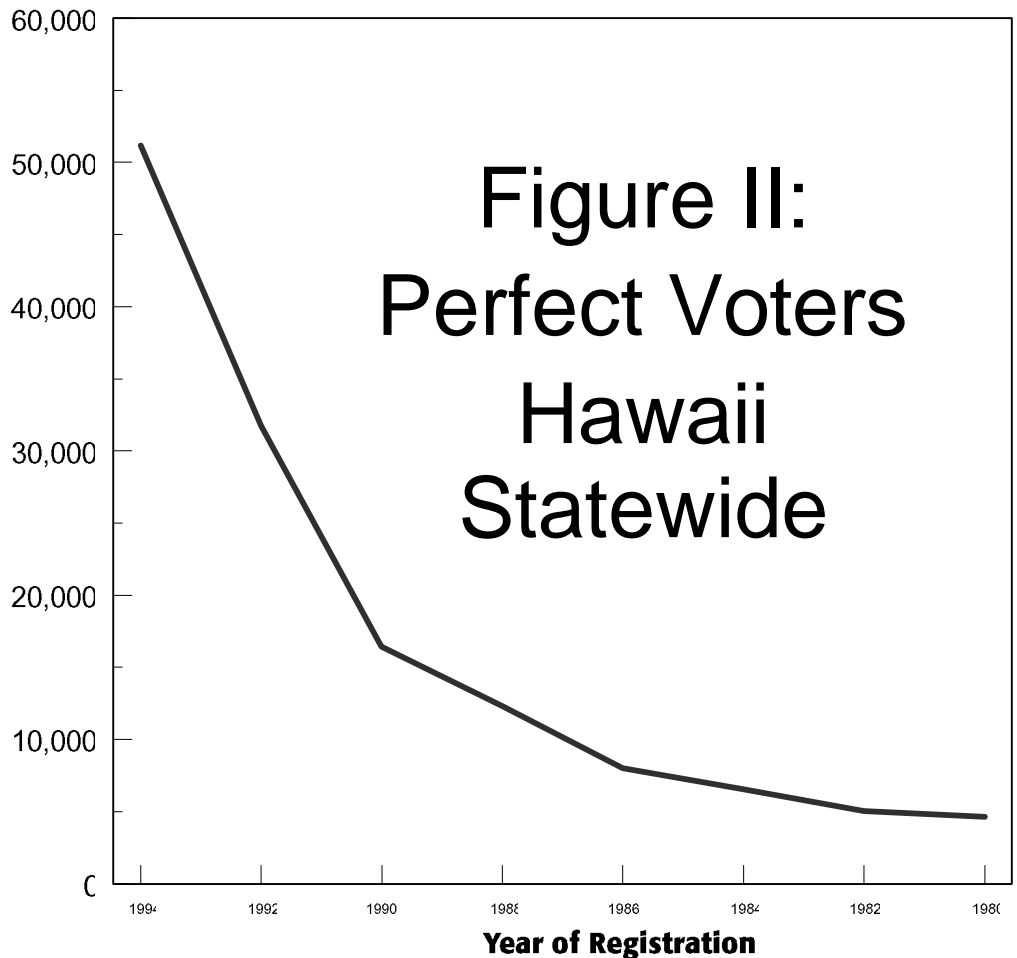
But more important for people who are doing political mailings, if you aren't careful the cost of mailing has just gone up about 16%. There

are an average of 16% more voters and households in every district in the state. Most of this "deadwood" won't show up on any election day in 1996, so money spent attempting to reach them is much less effectively spent than money spent attempting to reach the other 84% "proven voters".

You can reduce the cost of your mailings with VCS targeting. There are many ways to target voters for political mailings, campaign activities and various other communications. Most political organizations and campaigns have routinely been targeting by geographic area, age or ethnic groups, fields of special interest, etc. These methods have many valuable features, and in some cases also tend to reach voters who are statistically more likely to vote (long time residents, older voters, homeowners, etc.). Now it is also advantageous to consider a registrant's specific history of voting in past elections when ordering labels and other campaign communication materials.

### DO-IT-YOURSELF PURGE

The quickest and easiest way to avoid the 16% increase in mailing costs is simply to let VCS create a purge for you. Just order only voters who voted in either the Primary or General Election in 1994, or have registered since. This is a standard VCS select. We can give you voter and household counts immediately over the phone for this



group in your district, along with the total counts for your district from the current voter file.

This will give you slightly fewer voters than you would have had under the old purge system, because the County Clerks sent Post Cards to all voters about to be purged, asking if they wanted to stay registered. About 10% returned those cards, so you will be missing those people, but you are pretty close.

### IN SEARCH OF THE PERFECT VOTER

For those of us who are involved in the political process, voting seems a natural habit. Most of us can probably remember the few, if any, times we failed to vote. We know when the elections are coming and we also know which offices will be up for election in each year. We tend to drag friends and family with us to the polls. Many of our friends and family are involved in the political process as well. Many of us are "Perfect Voters", we never miss an opportunity to vote.

Who are the Perfect Voters and how many are there? These are the people who always vote. They care about politics and are going to consider your material. They should be included in almost any mailing. There are 127,556 voters who have voted in every election since the 1988 Primary, and 64,440 who have voted in every election since the 1980 Primary! These folks have a strong habit of voting! And it is very likely they will be voting again in 1996.

But in order for a voter to have established a record of voting they have to have had a chance. If you were 18 years old in 1994, you were only 4 years old back in 1980! We ought to give people a chance to be considered Perfect Voters if they have voted at every opportunity. Everyone who registered in 1993-94 and voted in both the Primary and General Elections in 1994 is a Perfect Voter. Similarly, everyone who registered in 1991-92 and voted in both the Primary and General in both 1992 and 1994 is a Perfect Voter. The graph to the left, *Figure II, Perfect Voters Hawaii Statewide*, shows the declining number of Perfect Voters as we carry this concept back to 1980. For the purposes of this graph, before 1994 we have considered someone a Perfect Voter if they voted just in the General Election in the year they registered, but in every election since.

If we add up the total number of these Perfect Voters statewide all the way back to 1980, and then add on

those who registered before 1980 but have voted in every election since the 1980 Primary, we get a total of 196,550 voters, or 51.6% of those who voted in the 1994 General!

### WHAT WILL THE BREAKDOWN BE IN 1996?

The pie chart below, *Figure III: Probable Makeup of the 1996 Electorate*, shows how we can expect the electorate to be broken down at the time of the 1996 General Election. This assumes that all of those now registered remain registered and about 70,000 more people register between now and then. This is consistent with past registration in even years, not counting re-registration of those purged.

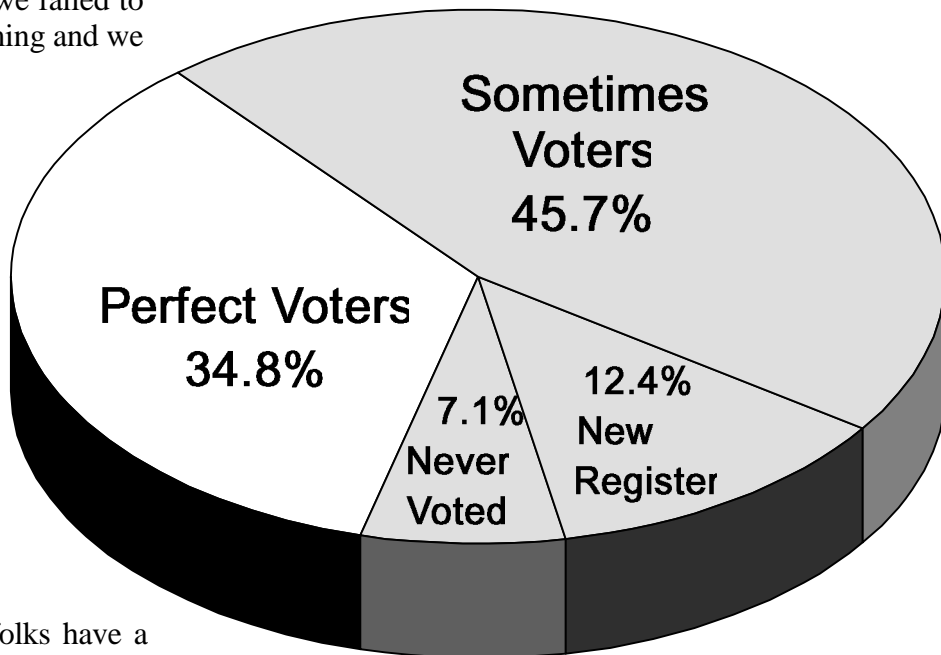


Figure III: Probable Makeup of the 1996 Electorate

You are going to have a hard time winning any election campaign by appealing only to Perfect Voters, but at the same time, you are going to have a hard time winning without them. A voter's specific history of voting in past elections -- Primaries and General, Presidential and Gubernatorial years -- can tell you a lot. In Hawaii, voter history will never entirely replace other key targeting variables for campaign use. But the rules about registered voters have changed. Victory goes to those who adapt to the changes of circumstance.

*Thanks to the Elections Division, Office of the Lieutenant Governor, and to Ken Hashimoto, Elections Administrator, Office of the Clerk of the City and County of Honolulu, for their invaluable assistance with historical data and perspective. Thanks to Rich Schlackman for suggesting the Perfect Voter concepts, and showing us how they might be used in a variety of circumstances.*

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