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Hawaii News

Hawaii ranks last for voter turnout

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Posted March 17, 2017

March 17, 2017



BRUCE ASATO / NOV. 8

General election voter turnout in Hawaii was the lowest in the nation at 43 percent. A handful of voters waits in line at a polling place in the Ewa Beach Elementary School cafeteria.

For the fifth presidential election in a row, Hawaii had the lowest voter turnout rate in the nation, with only 43 percent of eligible voters casting ballots, according to a study.

Hawaii ranked last out of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, preceded by West Virginia (50.8 percent), Texas (51.6 percent), Tennessee (52 percent) and Arkansas (53.1 percent).

Even with native son Barack Obama winning elections in 2008 and 2012, Hawaii had low voter turnout. The state hit rock bottom in the 2016 presidential election, according to a report released Thursday by Nonprofit VOTE and the U.S. Elections Project.

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All of the states in the bottom five were there for the third consecutive presidential election, according to the latest "America Goes to the Polls" report.

The report showed that none of those states had tightly contested presidential races.

And none of the five states let people register or update their voter registrations within three to four weeks of Election Day, according to the organizations.

Overall, the 2016 nationwide voter turnout of 60.2 percent of eligible voters was up 1.6 percentage points compared with 2012's 58.6 percent.

The six states with the highest voter turnouts were Minnesota (74.8 percent), Maine (72.8 percent), New Hampshire (72.5 percent), Colorado (72.1 percent), Wisconsin (70.5 percent) and Iowa (69 percent).

All six offer same-day voter registration and allow voters to register or update their registrations when they vote. Five were battleground states targeted by the presidential campaigns, according to "America Goes to the Polls."

"Voter participation is at the core of active citizenship and a healthy democracy," Brian Miller, executive director of Nonprofit VOTE, said in a statement. "This report offers the reader an opportunity to learn from the practical experience of policies already enacted in many states to promote voting, encourage healthy competition, and improve election integrity."

Political commentator Dan Boylan agreed that voters tend to stay away from Hawaii elections dominated by Democrats, which carries over to national presidential elections.

Locally, the 2016 presidential race between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump ended with Hawaii voters clearly preferring Clinton over Trump, who lost the overall popular vote across the country but won the most Electoral College votes.

The lopsided preference for Clinton in Hawaii ended up discouraging voters from local races that were dominated by Democrats, Boylan said.

The result, he said, was “the most boring Hawaii election I’ve ever seen. It’s gone on so long that this is really an uncontested state in every way, shape and form.”

Boylan agreed that increasing voter turnout is important and efforts need to be made “to make (voter) registration as easy as possible.”

But he said voters are mostly discouraged by “the phenomenon of the Democratic Party dominating Hawaii politics. We most definitely should have same-day registration. But that’s a relatively low factor.”

Neal Milner, a retired UH-Manoa political science professor, agreed.

He said Hawaii’s tradition of not voting has now become ingrained in the culture.

“Voting is a habit and nonvoting is a habit,” Milner said. “You can think of it (voting) as an obligation of citizenship, which is nice. But that’s not how it works.”

Voter turnout could increase through greater efforts to sign up voters for theoretical competitive races in the future, Milner said.

But it would take time to maintain high voter turnout, he said, because voting patterns over the past five presidential elections will be hard to defy.

“Voting habits carry over into the next generation,” Milner said, “and that’s why there wouldn’t be a sudden dramatic rise (in voting for a particular election year) that would then stay high.”

Todd Belt, a UH-Hilo political science professor, said, “We’ve become a very uncompetitive state. When people are worried their side might not win, that’s when they turn out to vote. Since we’re a Democratic state, people are just mailing it in.”

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