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Lawmakers say mail-in voting could bolster Hawaii's abysmal voter turnout

Published: Friday, March 17th 2017, 6:07 am HST

Updated: Friday, March 17th 2017, 12:38 pm HST

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HONOLULU (HawaiiNewsNow) - Hawaii has the lowest voter turnout rate in the nation, according to a recent study released by Nonprofit VOTE and the U.S. Elections Project.

And that's not a new distinction.

The 2016 "America Goes to the Polls" report reveals this is the fifth presidential election in a row in which the state has ranked dead last for voter participation.

According to the study, approximately 3 out of 5 eligible voters in Hawaii did not cast a ballot during the last presidential election. The voter turnout rate for the 2016 presidential election was 43 percent.

How does that compare to other states or the rest of the country as a whole?

The study reveals that national turnout for eligible voters is slightly increasing over the years and reached 60 percent in 2016.

The states with the highest voter participation -- Minnesota, Maine, New Hampshire, Colorado, Wisconsin and Iowa -- all had voter turnout that exceeded 60 percent and all six also offered same-day voter registration.

According to the report, five of them were battleground states that were heavily targeted by campaigns.

Hawaii ranked last out of the 50 states and D.C., with the next lowest turnout states listed as West Virginia, Texas, Tennessee and Arkansas. None are battleground states, and the study reveals all five cut off the ability to register or update a registration at least three to four weeks before Election Day.

Hawaii News Now Political Analyst Colin Moore says Hawaii voter participation has always been dismal and especially so when voters feel that as a Democratic state the results are already pre-determined for them. Last fall, in the days leading up the presidential election,

Moore told Hawaii News Now he didn't expect a high voter turnout because the local races weren't generating enough interest to get people to the polls.

Political analysts describe Hawaii's voter turnout rate as historically disappointing, but local lawmakers have a plan they say has proven to be successful in other states.

A bill that is now making its way through the Senate after passing in the House would create all mail-in voting -- also known as "vote by mail" -- statewide by 2020. Lawmakers say it would not only help with voter turnout, but it would save the state approximately \$800,000 to \$1 million per year.

"We would mail ballots to every voter and they would have a chance to mail it back or drop it off at a service center," explained Rep. Scott Nishimoto (D - Kapahulu, McCully, Moiliili).

Ballots would be mailed out well ahead of Election Day allowing voters an "election period," not just a single day, to vote. It's essentially absentee voting for everyone. It would not prevent in-person voting. Many states that have mail-in voting still allow voters to cast ballots at a precinct, if they prefer.

At least 22 states have statutes that allow certain elections to be conducted by mail. As of January 2017, three of those states -- Oregon, Washington and Colorado -- hold all elections entirely by mail.

There have been many attempts over the years to increase Hawaii's voter participation, including online voter registration, which began in 2015. Nearly three years ago, lawmakers passed a bill to allow for same-day voting registration, but that won't start until the 2018 elections.

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