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COMMUNITY VOICE

A Possible Solution To Dwindling Voter Turnout

Hawaii should move to a full vote by mail system to increase the number of ballots cast. And it will save money.

DECEMBER 5, 2016 · By Jamila Coronado 

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Every election, finding enough volunteers to staff the precincts has been increasingly difficult. Without enough volunteers, many of the precinct locations are shorthanded, leading to long lines and voter frustration as we saw during the 2016 General Election.

The question then becomes what can we do as citizens to alleviate the long waits and ensure that our votes are counted?

This year, I decided to volunteer for the Office of Elections as a Control Center Operator to learn about how the voting process works. Having only recently become a U.S. citizen, I have never previously had the opportunity to vote, and there were many things about the process that I was unfamiliar with. However, there is one thing that wasn't hard to miss, and that was the consistent lack of enough volunteers at the precinct locations.

As a Control Center Operator, volunteers work closely with the precinct chairperson to help open polling locations on time, while also ensuring that all precinct locations run smoothly

during Election Day. As the initial help desk for all Oahu polling locations, Control Center personnel are the people in charge of assisting voters if they run into issues like change of address, turning in absentee ballots or simply finding a voter's correct assigned polling location.



PF Bentley/Civil Beat

Primary election day at Kalani High School, Aug. 9, 2014.

During the general election, some of the precinct chairpersons voiced their concerns of not having enough volunteers for their location, and because of this, some of the polling locations had longer lines of people waiting to be helped. In fact, some polling locations had a hard time closing their polling locations, as there were just not enough volunteers. This was also true for the Control Center, where almost half of the volunteers did not show up, leading to many precinct locations experiencing difficulty getting ahold of the Control Center for assistance.

The issue of consistently having a lack of enough volunteers is just one example of many problems that are plaguing Hawaii's election process, which in turn leads to the greatest concern: a dwindling voter turnout.

People are increasingly being turned off of participating in the voting process, and preventable inconveniences and inefficiencies in the process itself play a direct role in this growing decline. [In the 2012 general election, voter turnout in Hawaii was 61.9 percent of total registered voters.](#) During the [midterm election of 2014, turnout reached an all-time low of 52.3 percent where only 359,642 of 705,890 registered voters went out to vote.](#) Recent statistics show that during the [2016 general election, voter turnout equated to only 58.3 percent.](#)

Simply finding a way to increase volunteers will not solve the problem of low voter turnout. However, there is one possible solution that just may help.

One solution I feel can put us in the right direction is to create a vote by mail system similar to what other states have already adopted. Instead of citizens rushing to polling places only to wait for hours in lines on Election Day, a ballot would automatically be mailed out well in advance to every registered voter with no prior request or application necessary.

While this idea may sound absurd at first glance, data shows that in recent years many Hawaii voters have opted to vote by mail or early walk-in instead of voting in person on Election Day. [In the 2012 general election, 45.8 percent of votes cast were via absentee ballot,](#) and in the [2014 midterm election, absentee ballots became the majority of all votes that were cast at 52.6 percent.](#) This recent [general election of 2016 shows that 53.5 percent](#) of all votes cast were from absentee ballot.

One of the leading states in voter turnout is Oregon, which adopted a vote by mail system beginning in 1981. During the [midterm election of 2014, Oregon had a total of 70.9 percent turnout of total registered voters,](#) and most recently during the [general election of 2016, the state managed to go above and beyond, reaching a statewide voter turnout of 78.7 percent.](#)

Registered voters in the state of Oregon receive a ballot two to three weeks before an election, allowing them to have the time to do research on the issues and candidates that are on the ballot. Furthermore, Washington and Colorado have also adopted similar vote by mail systems and have shown increased voter turnout over the years. Moreover, officials have not found any evidence of additional complications in election administration or increased voter fraud resulting from the vote by mail system.

Having a vote by mail system will not only increase voter turnout, it will create more convenience for voters as well as cost savings for the state by reducing the number of polling

locations and volunteers needed to ensure elections run smoothly.

Currently, the state of Hawaii allows voters to cast their ballots via one of three methods: mail-in absentee, absentee walk-in, and the traditional Election Day voting at precincts. The Office of Elections estimates that approximately \$800,000 would be saved in each election cycle by simply converting to a vote by mail system and having a limited number of precincts open.

At a time when the voting process is increasingly hampered by a dwindling participating electorate as well as overcrowded and understaffed precincts, we must look to this as a potential remedy to improve the ailing voting process.

Democracy can only work when everyone is heard.

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About the Author



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