



August 26, 2016 | ☀️ 77° | 🚗 Check Traffic

Editorial | Name in the News

Common Cause executive director a voice for election reform

By [Vicki Viotti](#)

Posted August 26, 2016

August 26, 2016



DENNIS ODA / DODA@STARADVERTISER.COM

Corie Tanida, Executive director, Common Cause Hawaii.

Voting is a big deal with Corie Tanida, to put it mildly.

The newly installed executive director of Common Cause Hawaii sees promoting access to the ballot among the top priorities for the nonprofit, good-government advocacy group.

Tanida cited her own frustrating experience.

"I remember when I was in the Peace Corps, I was trying to get an absentee ballot, and I just couldn't do it," said Tanida, 31, whose corps assignment had been in El Salvador. "That was like the only elections I missed out on."

The improved electoral landscape in Hawaii, already a liberal ballot-access state, has been among the recent advances Common Cause has championed. On the win list, Tanida put same-day voter registration — available at early-voting sites in this election cycle, coming to election-day polling places in 2018 — and online voter registration.

The Moanalua High School graduate earned her bachelor's degree in political science with a minor in Spanish at the University of Evansville in Indiana. She's now at Chaminade University, pursuing a master's in business administration with a concentration in nonprofits.

Tanida was working as a researcher for the state Senate Ways and Means Committee when, in 2013, Common Cause hired her as a part-time project coordinator for Civic Celerator (civic.celerator.org).

That project drew together web developers who created apps Tanida hopes can be updated for the 2016 general election.

In 2014, one of them allowed visitors to look up their ballot, pulling up links to campaign information about each candidate for easier reference.

Before taking over the top spot on Aug. 1, Tanida also worked as the chapter's senior organizer, heading up awareness campaigns. One explained to taxpayers that the check-off on their tax form for publicly funded elections merely allots \$3 of what they owe the state to go to the trust fund underwriting such campaigns.

A big push next session will be to reserve that fund for public campaign finance, as intended; it's now being drained to underwrite the Campaign Spending Commission.

Encouraging voting remains a goal, she said, so the primary election's record low turnout was disappointing.

"We do encourage everybody to vote, especially for these local races, because they affect us so much more directly," Tanida said. "For me personally, primaries are so much more competitive than the general. It's not something to ignore."

QUESTION: How will Common Cause push to secure support for both publicly funded elections and the Campaign Spending Commission, now both drawing from the same trust fund?

ANSWER: In the past we have had bills introduced in the Legislature. Unfortunately last session, for example, it was completely changed from ensuring that the Campaign Spending Commission is funded from the general fund.

Q: So they just completely rewrote it. Can you try again?

A: We were hoping to try, yeah. I would like to.

Q: Was the trust fund originally set up just to fund publicly funded elections, and then they passed a law to allow it to be tapped?

A: Pretty much, in a nutshell, yeah. Because at the Constitutional Convention in 1978 was when (the commission) was set up. Then just recently in the past few years, the Legislature ... decided instead of having it in the general fund, to have it sustained that way.

Q: Was this when there were all the budget cuts in the recession?

A: I think so. You know, I understand there were tight times, and a lot of other special funds ...

Q: Got pulled?

A: Yeah ... but this is still ongoing years later. And, like I said, the fund is on the verge of having nothing in there. So, if nothing changes, we're going to lose both programs — the agency and the publicly funded elections.

So if we lose the Campaign Spending Commission, who's going to enforce and administer campaign finance laws?

We're very concerned. And I think the legislators are, too. But they're kind of running out of time to take action, because every year they keep drawing down this fund.

But again, to clarify, the rate that taxpayers do check "yes" is enough to sustain the publicly financed elections program. It is. But because of this added strain, that's why it's going down.

Q: Since the Citizens United ruling, with money pouring in, do you still believe that publicly funded elections work, can be competitive? Is there a next step to improve it?

A: I do think it can work. But first of all, we need to address this issue of sustainability. ...

Q: These are partially publicly financed elections, so you can raise money privately under this system, but to a limit, right?

A: Right. And it does work. I mean, look at Gov. (David) Ige. He used this program, and it worked for him.

Q: Are there any particular initiatives that pertain to this election season that you are pursuing?

A: We have two big campaigns going on. The first is control center operators, and the other is "Who Will Fight Big Money?" ...

Q: What are these about?

A: We're working with the Office of Elections, ... There are precinct workers, and we encourage that, too. ... But control center on Oahu is where all the precincts, if they have problems, that's where they call in to.

These volunteers, they do get a small stipend from the state, but they're trained to answer the phones and help address the problems (at the precincts). ...

A lot of it is address changes, name changes. Sometimes there are other (voter) issues, like the ballot, or they're not in the poll book, things like that. So we help resolve that or we help direct the call to a higher-up manager who can help with that.

Q: The goal being enabling them to vote?

A: Exactly. ... More and more people are using absentee ballots. ...

Q: So people voting by mail can call in to the control center, too?

A: No, it's just precinct operations. But a lot of people, they actually drop off their absentee ballots, they didn't mail it. ... In the past — and I think we're going to do it again, I would like to — we do support all-mail voting. Maybe do something similar to how Oregon does it. ...

And automatic voter registration, having people who are eligible, automatically registered when they get their (driver's) license. And they could have the opportunity to opt out, instead of the system we have now, where you have to opt in and fill out all these extra forms.

Q: Common Cause supports all-mail voting because you believe it will increase our voter turnout?

A: Yeah, possibly. ... Look at Oregon — it increased.

Again, just kind of de facto, we are heading toward that anyway. ... Granted, the turnout was horrible this election. But again, for all of these, it's just reducing barriers to voting. ...

And then I did have callers on election day, "I want to register, I want to vote." ... You just feel so bad. They want to do it, but you have to turn them away. Or they have to do a provisional ballot, but typically they aren't counted. ...

Q: Going back to the "Who Will Fight Big Money" thing, what is that about?

A: Everything's online these days!

(Laughs, pulls up the whowillfightbigmoney.org site)

So, we have a campaign, and it's national, we're doing it with our partners. Simple questionnaire, yes or no questions to all of our congressional candidates who are running this election season, about what they're going to do to fight big money. Do they support publicly financed elections? Do they support reducing barriers to the polling places? That kind of thing.

You just put your address ... and then you can see.

We actually reached out to these candidates, and you can see their responses, verbatim. We want people to make the decisions for themselves. And vote! That's the bottom line. But they should be informed when they vote.

Q: Does Common Cause have a position on a constitutional amendment to overturn Citizens United?

A: Obviously we support overturning Citizens United. ... (Former Common Cause Director) Nikki Love, she led the charge right after the decision came out to ask our state Legislature to pass a resolution in support of overturning it. Our state was the first in the nation to do that.

Since that time, we were able to build up momentum, and now all of the counties — thanks to our wonderful volunteers, we've worked with them over the past year — now all of the counties have passed resolutions also calling to overturn it.

Q: What's the impact of such resolutions?

A: There are two paths. You can either go through Congress, and they have to ratify it, and then the states have to ratify it. Or you could have the constitutional convention; that's never happened before. And then after all that, the states would have to ratify it as well.

So we would prefer to go through Congress on this specific issue because, one, the constitutional convention has never been done, and then there's no set rules.

So, really, even if you call it specifically for Citizens United, they could talk about anything. Anything. So anything could be thrown in there ...

So that's our preferred path. People might disagree with that, but we don't want to open that can of worms.

Q: So it's a high bar, right?

A: It's a high bar, but it's not impossible.

Q: But all of this money hasn't delivered election in a lot of cases. What do you see as the down side of money in politics?

A: It is true, money does not always equate to victory. But it often buys a lot of influence and access to people that you may not get to have one-on-ones with otherwise.

If you are looking ad-wise, or anything like that, it can buy you a bigger megaphone.