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Denby Fawcett: Voters Didn't Show Up Because the Election Was Boring

The candidates were low-key, and even the attack ads were predictable. New solutions are needed to entice more people to the polls.

NOVEMBER 12, 2014 • By Denby Fawcett 

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Before getting too tangled up in analyzing why a record number of people failed to vote in Hawaii's general election this year, I offer a one-word answer: Boredom.

And when a political diva like me finds an election boring, you know there is a problem. I am normally thrilled by local politics.

A new low of 52.3 percent showed up at the polls this year. Hawaii's previous low turnout for a general election was 52.7 percent in 2006.

This election was clearly dull to some voters because there were no "villains" to take out such as Gov. Neil Abercrombie, in whom Hawaii Democrats had lost faith and tossed out with a historic vote in the primary election. Or the mean-seeming Mufi Hannemann of past elections. There was no reason for vindictive voters to go after Hannemann this time. The former Honolulu mayor had worked hard to reinvent himself into a kindly statesman. And with very little money to spend and consistently low poll numbers, he was no longer a threat.

Brian Tseng/Civil Beat



Mostly empty voting booths like these at Manoa Elementary School were all too common this year.

Carmille Lim, executive director of Common Cause Hawaii, says all the excitement tapered off after the primary because many people were resigned to the fact that Democrats would win all the big races. Boredom set in.

Voter ennui was increased by the long, long three months from the primary to the general election with the endless series of forums that over-saturated residents with information about the candidates.

There used to be only 45 days between Hawaii's two elections, but in 2012 state law extended the time to 90 days to give residents living away from the islands more time to submit their votes.

The TV stations and community groups called the endless candidate discussions they organized over the three months leading up to the general election "debates," but in reality there was very little back and forth debating.

Instead, the candidate forums were sleep-inducing panel discussions during which the candidates stated and restated their positions on issues.

Democratic gubernatorial candidate David Ige was a halting speaker. Republican Duke Aiona looked like he would rather be at a basketball game. And Hawaii Independent Party candidate Hannemann performed exceptionally well, but that didn't seem to inspire voters to support him.

And besides the forums, there was the surge of TV commercials and candidate mailers blasting from every direction before Election Day.

"The public was saturated with information. There were so many messages from the different campaigns and super PACs. Voters became fatigued," says Glenn Takahashi, elections administrator for Honolulu City and County.

Even the funky and sometimes fascinating negative political commercials started to all look alike with their scary music and shadowy, distorted pictures of the candidates. The commercials began to lose their punch when three or four negative ads appeared back to back in the same commercial break. It was tiresome.

And there were no compelling issues this time around.

Common Cause Executive Director Lim believes a larger pool of candidates is needed, new and exciting candidates from all political parties.

Aiona backed away from the same-sex marriage issue and abortion rights early on. This strategy was also employed by many Republicans on the mainland in hopes of broadening their base of support.

Former state GOP director

Dylan Nonaka says Aiona's decision to ignore the gay marriage issue reduced election excitement and robbed Aiona of votes.

"You have to keep hope alive in your hard core supporters. Duke definitely closed the door. Some of his former constituents saw no reason to come out and vote for him,"

says Nonaka.

Only Hannemann raised exciting issues such the possibility of reviving interisland ferry service. But there was no money to put behind a ferry, no traction. The idea went nowhere.

Then there were the candidates themselves, all nice individuals but humdrum.

Ige came from 28 years in the state Legislature, yet was still virtually unknown when the campaign began,

Mark Takai was a low-key state representative who had never run for federal office before. Takai struggled up until Election Day to gain more name recognition against his better-known GOP opponent, Charles Djou.

Djou was also low-key as a candidate, an earnest family man, not dramatic in any way.

Telling a non-voter that it is bad for him to ignore his civic duty to vote is akin to telling an addicted smoker, “Smoking is harmful to your health.”

Political analyst Nonaka says in the era of the Internet it can be better for a candidate to be bland because flamboyant politicians with their colorful shoot-from-the-hip way of talking can be easy targets on social media.

“Negative information can spread so fast with social networking,” says Nonaka. “With too much controversy, your opponent can blow a statement out of proportion or highlight one of your slip-ups and you will suffer.”

Nonaka points out how U.S. Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, one of Hawaii’s most colorful political candidates, took social media hits when her office initially hesitated to reveal to the public that the congresswoman had decided to continue surfing at Waikiki with a Yahoo reporter rather than attend a U.S. Senate hearing where she was expected on veterans’ health care.

Or consider the dramatic Abercrombie. His statements were often taken out of context and spread across the Internet. The most infamous was Abercrombie's declaration: "I am the governor. I am not your pal. I am not your counselor. I am the governor."

Abercrombie was making a logical statement that leaders often have to make hard choices that are unpopular with the public, but when his words went viral on social media, he came off looking conceited and disconnected.

So what is the answer to turn around Hawaii's voter apathy and make elections more enticing?

Common Cause Executive Director Lim believes a larger pool of candidates is needed, new and exciting candidates from all political parties, new Democrat hopefuls, new Republican wannabes and other candidates from parties including the Greens, Independents and Libertarians. Not just the same recycled Democrats voters are offered today.

Lim says potential voters will continue to be bored if they think incumbent Democrats will always win even if they make the effort to vote for other candidates.

But Lim also says that to engage voters, candidates must be sincere and truly motivated to serve the public.

In 2016, residents will be able to register on line, and at early voting sites 10 days before an election.

office because I don't like my current job."

Lim says this year she found herself constantly pressing her palm to her forehead in exasperation after she talked to poorly prepared, weak political candidates who told her things such as, "I want to run for

Political analyst Neal Milner thinks same-day voter registration will spark more voter participation. And Lim agrees.

Currently, Hawaii residents must register no later than 30 days before an election or they can't vote.

In 2016, residents will be able to register on line, and at early voting sites 10 days before an election.

And in the 2018 election, residents will be able to simply show up at their assigned polling site for same-day voter registration.

Eleven other states allow people to register and vote on the same day.

Same-day registration will help first-time voters who are unaware that there are separate deadlines for voter registration and voting, as well as people who have moved here and don't realize they have to re-register.

But what about the hundreds of thousands of Hawaii voters who are already registered yet refuse to go to the polls? That's almost half of the state's 706,890 registered voters.

These people are in the habit of not voting; you could even say they are addicted to not voting. It will be difficult to change their behavior.

Projects like "No Vote, No Grumble" are well meaning but silly. Telling a non-voter that it is bad for him to ignore his civic duty to vote is akin to telling an addicted smoker, "Smoking is harmful to your health."

Maybe it would work to poke fun at the non-voters, like current TV commercials that show arrested drunken drivers looking like idiots when they are incarcerated. That might be useless, too, but at least the commercials won't be boring.

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About the Author

COLUMNIST

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Denby Fawcett is a longtime Hawaii television and newspaper journalist, who grew up in Honolulu. Her new book, [Secrets of Diamond Head: A History and Trail Guide](#) is available on



Amazon.

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Jack Kelly

Great column Denby, you hit the nail on the head. Campaigns have been "dumbed down" to the level of meaningless. Too bad no journalists dug down deep to discover which factions of the Democratic party were pushing for which candidates from the shadows and why. That story would actually be fascinating. The inner workings of the local Democratic juggernaut is the story in Hawaii.

Like · Reply · Nov 12, 2014 8:09am



Geoff Reynolds · Stadium

Perhaps voting should be mandatory with non performance penalties.

Like · Reply · 1 · Nov 12, 2014 9:50am



Anthony Aalto · Clock Face

Agreed. Make voting compulsory as it is in Australia. People have fought and died for our democracy - a legal obligation to vote would be but a small acknowledgement of their sacrifice. It would be no infringement of rights - citizens could still go into the booth and abstain, write-in a candidate or deface the ballot if they wanted to express dissatisfaction with the current crop of candidates. We can also go a long way towards making voting easier: make election day a holiday, or hold it on a Saturday or Sunday, and further encourage the trend to mail-in ballots.

Like · Reply · Nov 12, 2014 10:19am



Grant Jones

Is there any political, social or economic problem that cannot be solved with a gun pointed at your neighbor's head?

Like · Reply · Nov 12, 2014 4:52pm



Rick Tubania · University of Hawaii at Manoa

Anthony Aalto - what is the purpose if people go to the polls and not vote or deface the ballot as you suggest? why waste people's time and money to go to polls just to act stupid? to me only engaged voters should vote, those who are not should not as they don't care who gets elected.

Like · Reply · Nov 12, 2014 9:55pm

**Jim Shon** · Director at Hawai'i Educational Policy Center

Somehow, thinking of voters as, well, children, needing entertainment and stimulation is a sad commentary on a society of adults that are often manipulated to be motivated.

Like · Reply · 10 · Nov 12, 2014 10:02am

**Alan Sarhan** · The University of Arizona

I'm not sure that the quality of candidates has much impact on participation. I've voted in every election since 1970, whether the candidates were dolts or wizards; but I don't know the answer, except maybe restructure government so it's more local. Being one voter for a statewide office or the Honolulu Council probably doesn't seem like democratic power to most people. But I do have to point out that this quote made my day: "Lim says this year she found herself constantly pressing her palm to her forehead in exasperation after she talked to poorly prepared, weak political candidates who told her things such as, 'I want to run for office because I don't like my current job.' "

Like · Reply · 4 · Nov 12, 2014 10:36am

**Patricia Blair** · University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Actually, I think that there has been a loss of a personal sense of civic duty. My age group was raised from a different perspective...voting was our duty, but you will find a difference in perception as to how involved and vocal one will be on the issues.

Like · Reply · 7 · Nov 12, 2014 10:53am

**Alan Sarhan** · The University of Arizona

Good point, Patricia. When I was in school we had to take a Civics class that taught us how democracy and community work. It left me impatient to get to voting age so I could take part. Anyone know if there's still such a requirement?

Like · Reply · Nov 13, 2014 8:30am

**Chris Profio**

"I want to run for office because I don't like my current job." Is THIS why Mufi ran again this time?

Like · Reply · 2 · Nov 12, 2014 11:02am

**Kimo Sutton** · P R and marketing at Presison Tune

Shon is right the real underlying problems are not being examined just a quick dismissal by Denby. Voter have a history by each persons participation and as a expert would look at the patterns. Some vote every time some once in four years. Unions help their candidates win with large get out ther supporters drives. How can this reporter not know that? With so many non participant she does not look scientifically at reason or have smart resources to give reason beyond her simpleton idea. If she is right Hawaii needs a lottery for those who will vote to get them out and possibly get a gift of tr... See More

Like · Reply · 1 · Nov 12, 2014 12:04pm

**Frank De Giacomo**

Same problem locally as nationally. No one giving people something to vote for, only telling them what to vote against. Perhaps because giving people something to vote for means they wouldn't get all that corporate money to pay for their campaigns. Instead people get cynical and stay home thinking nothing is going to change. That's something the rich folks and the

and stay home thinking nothing is going to change. That's something the rich folks and the corporations love.

Hopefully Elle Cochran on Maui and Stanley Chang on Oahu will get resolutions passed to ask the Legislature for voter owned elections.

Like · Reply · Nov 12, 2014 12:25pm



Tara DeWitt Coomans · Founder/Pack Leader at Poodle Mafia

It's true that this election never caught "steam" in the way past elections, including our Gubernatorial primary have.

Consider the messages voters sent to politicians with the primary 1) don't tick off the unions 2) be a nice guy. Not so sure these two attributes create great leaders needed by our state, even if it IS what the voters said they wanted.

Those that don't vote, feel it doesn't matter because candidates aren't speaking to them - they are speaking to organized groups (aka as "the base") who vote but who may or may not represent the positions of the people in the middle.

If the middle voted, the fringe would have less influence. Something to think about over the next couple of years.

Like · Reply · 1 · Nov 12, 2014 12:27pm



Philip Wood · San Jose State University

I'm certain Denby is right; that boredom kept voters from the polls. However, there are two other elements that should be considered. One is that negative campaigning diminishes the role of politicians and the vocation of politics. Who are voters to believe? And what are they to believe about the candidates? Nothing good, certainly. So why bother to vote?

The second is that nothing changes no matter who they vote for. Thus, why vote? It's time to recognize that politicians have made their own bed and, in doing so, have stomped on Democracy and the entire idea that voting is important.

Cynicism has now been deeply embedded in the electorate. In other words, who cares? And what difference will my vote make?

Like · Reply · 1 · Nov 12, 2014 1:04pm

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