



April 25, 2016 | ☀️ 84° | 🚗 Check Traffic

Hawaii News

Election officials bemoan huge workload

[Sophie Cocke](#)

November 4, 2015



The Office of Elections needs 300 more volunteers to help out with Saturday's primary. Election clerk Stefanie Dvorak signed in a walk-in voter Tuesday at Honolulu Hale.

County and state election officials advocated for major voting reforms — including all-mail elections and automatic voter registration — during a joint legislative briefing Tuesday at the state Capitol that included members of the Senate Judiciary and Labor and House Judiciary committees.

Election officials said that they are drowning in paper registration forms and struggling

to carry out three separate election processes that include absentee voting, early walk-in voting and precinct elections. Digitizing and simplifying the processes for registering voters and casting ballots would not only save the counties money, but also would likely boost voter turnout, said officials.

“My generation looked at and considered elections as a privilege and a duty. Generations unfortunately now use terms like ‘convenience,’” said Maui County Clerk Danny Mateo. “We all know that providing the vehicle for our citizens to register to vote is just one issue. The major issue that we all need to address is how do we get them out to the polls.”

Mateo and other election officials were called to brief members of the Legislature on recent voting reforms and possible future improvements as several election bills will carry over from the last legislative session and are expected to be considered when the Legislature resumes in January.

House Bill 401 would automatically register residents to vote when they apply for or renew a driver’s license or identification card. House Bill 124 would institute an all-mail election.

A more controversial bill, House Bill 1495, would fine registered voters \$100 if they didn’t vote and failed to proffer up a valid excuse.

In the case of an all-mail election, ballots could be automatically mailed to all registered voters with stamped return envelopes, said officials.

Kauai County Clerk Jade Fountain-Tanigawa told lawmakers that if the state moved to an all-mail election, Kauai would no longer have to recruit, train and manage about 600 election officials, nor would the county have to test and deploy 50 paper ballot scanners and manage 15 polling places.

The “current voting model is a complex process requiring the precise coordination between election officials, several vendors and hundreds of volunteers to simply provide voting services,” said Fountain-Tanigawa.

The counties are also pushing for a system in which residents are automatically registered to vote when applying for or renewing a driver’s license or identification card.

The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 established a “motor-voter program,” which allowed people to register to vote when applying for or renewing a driver’s license. Currently, residents can choose to register to vote when they fill out the applications. Under automatic registration, residents would instead have to opt out if they didn’t want to be registered, which is expected to boost voter registration rates.

The current “motor voter” system is also paper intensive — tens of thousands of paper registration forms are dropped off at county election offices annually. Only a fraction

of the applications end up being new registrations because most residents are already registered, officials said.

Under an automatic registration system, county officials would no longer have to sift through thousands of paper forms and enter information into a separate database. Registration information from driver's license and identification forms could instead be electronically transferred to the county clerks' offices.

"An automated system which electronically transfers applicant information, citizenship status and signature images will virtually eliminate the transfer of paper documents between the driver licensing divisions and county clerks and vastly improve the overall efficiency of the motor-voter registration process," said Fountain-Tanigawa.

Election officials also briefed lawmakers on recent election laws. Act 225, which was signed into law in 2012 but didn't go into effect until August, allows residents to register to vote online.

Statewide, 1,866 people have registered or updated their registration through the state's new online system, said Scott Nago, the state's chief election officer.

Starting next year, residents will also be able to register to vote at absentee walk-in locations before Election Day. In 2018 same-day registration will be extended to polling places on Election Day.

Election officials are still determining what types of identification will be needed for same-day registration and voting, which became a point of contention for several lawmakers after county officials indicated that picture identification was not currently a requirement.

"What are you doing to make sure that our election process is as safe as possible, that we aren't going to encourage fraud?" asked Sen. Donna Mercado Kim (D, Kalihi Valley-Moanalua-Halawa), adding that some local elections have been won and lost by just a handful of votes.

As county election officials struggled to respond to such inquiries from Kim and other lawmakers, Senate Judiciary and Labor Chairman Gilbert Keith-Agaran reminded his colleagues that it was they who failed to specify identification requirements under Act 166.

"This Legislature did pass this law without thinking about that issue," Keith-Agaran (D, Waihee-Wailuku-Kahului) said to chuckles in the audience.