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A national study that measures how well U.S. states conduct elections starts with the premise that a well-run election is one in which all eligible voters can easily participate, and in which only eligible voters cast ballots, which are counted accurately and fairly. Maintaining this convenience and integrity through all the administrative phases of each election — registration, voting, counting the ballots and reporting the outcome — ensures a functioning democracy.

Well-run elections also buoy the public's trust in government more generally, goodwill that can spur citizen engagement in any number of community issues. This participation matters, not only on the hot-button topics that garner headlines, but also in more mundane civic affairs. Over time, the citizenry's prevailing opinions influence the rules, standards and laws that determine so many aspects of our daily lives.

At least that's how it should work: One person, one vote. Every vote counts and every vote matters.

So the Pew Charitable Trusts' latest Election Performance Index is disturbing on multiple levels, highlighting as it does the chronic ennui of Hawaii's electorate and specific shortcomings in the government offices that oversee elections, primarily the state Office of Elections.

The EPI analyzes 17 key indicators of election administration, including factors such as voter turnout, average waiting time at the polls, the availability of online voter registration and problems with absentee ballots. Overall, 40 states and the District of Columbia improved their scores from 2008 to 2012, but Hawaii was not among them. Hawaii landed among the lowest performers, its overall EPI average down 4 percentage points.

Ballot shortages and long lines at two dozen precincts during the November 2012 general election contributed to Hawaii's poor rating, but those unusual circumstances were not the sole reason. Problems even registering to vote also rose from 2008 to 2012, as did trouble with absentee ballots.

Each factor is a serious problem on its own, and collectively serve to suppress voter turnout and thus civic engagement. Hawaii has the lowest voter turnout of any state, and, even worse, that figure is headed in the wrong direction. We were the only state with turnout below 50 percent in 2008 and less than 45 percent in 2012.

Explanations for why eligible voters are so disengaged range from the rosy view that folks are satisfied with the status quo to the grim outlook that citizens have given up hope of even trying to make a

difference through the ballot box. Both extremes are incorrect. A U.S. Census report last year sheds light on general attitudes that are applicable here, too: 19 percent of the nonvoters surveyed said they were too busy to cast a ballot.

Coming innovations offer hope on that count. The state plans to offer online voter registration starting in 2016, a welcome step that may spur interest especially among younger voters. The state must couple this advancement with other online tools that reinforce the importance of exercising the right to vote, for young adults and new citizens eligible for the first time, and for older residents who fell out of or never developed the habit. In addition, a worthy bill moving in the Legislature would let voters register at absentee polling places by the 2016 elections and as late as Election Day by 2018; we hope this measure passes.

These steps, coupled with better management by election officials, should boost Hawaii's EPIrank in future studies. More important, they will improve the state itself. A government of the people, by the people, for the people, works best when the people show up to vote.

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