

POLITICS

Hawaii's Voter Registration Is Way Up — Does It Matter?

The advent of online registration is given a lot of credit. But that may not reverse the trend of low voter turnouts.

NOVEMBER 7, 2016 · By Natanya Friedheim [Twitter](#) [Email](#) [RSS](#)

Share 29

Share 2

More Hawaii residents have registered to vote this year than ever before.

The ease of online registration, offered for the first time in Hawaii this election cycle, might explain the increase in the total electorate to 749,917 (as of Oct. 10, the deadline for online and mail-in registration).

“It doesn’t sound like much,” said Colin Moore, a political science professor at the University of Hawaii, “but compared to having to print out the form and mail it in, it significantly decreases the burden.”



Jana Purington, 22, grew up on Oahu but moved to Oregon for college. She returned to the islands recently and registered to vote in Hawaii for the first time this year.

It remains to be seen if the increase in registrants translates to more people actually casting ballots in Tuesday's general election — historically that has not been the case in Hawaii.

“You're not making voting any easier,” said political analyst Neal Milner said. “You're making it easier to register.”

Hawaii's overall electorate hasn't changed much since 2010. In the last four election cycles, women have made up a higher percent of registrants than men. This year, women made up almost 60 percent of new registered voters in the 18-29 age group.

“Women have a lot of stake in this election.” — Meda Chesney-Lind

Jana Purington is one of them.

“Coming home I realized how little I knew about the goings-on in the city and county,” said Purington, who grew up on

Oahu but went to college in Oregon. She registered to vote in Hawaii for the first time since moving back.

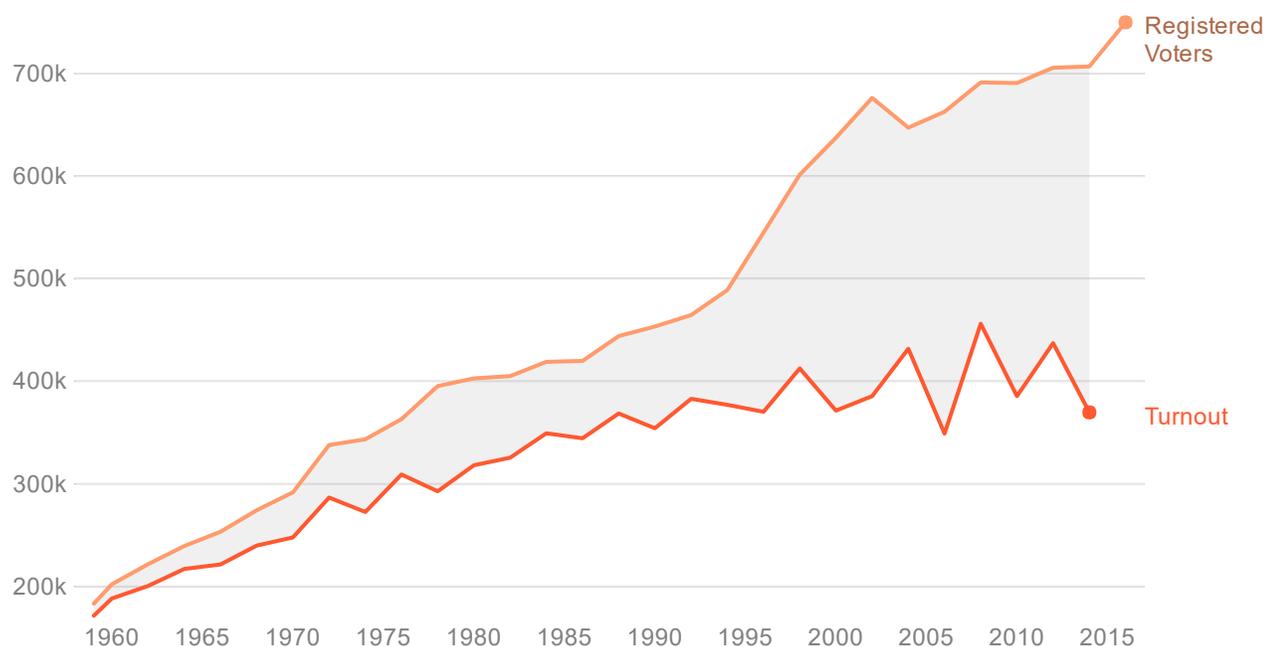
“When we have rants around the dinner table, so much of that is about local stuff that goes on,” she said. “I wanted to be able to try at least to have more of a say of what goes on.”

People 19-29 have always constituted the smallest voter age group in Hawaii. Their percentage of the total electorate fell from 2010 to 2014, but rose slightly this year.

People over 65 continue to make up the highest percentage of registered voters in the state, according to data from 2010 to 2016. The trend continues as this year the number of registered voters over 65 increased by about 10 percent from 2014, a higher percent increase than any other age group.

REGISTRATION IS UP, BUT TURNOUT IS LOW

Over the last 50 years, the gap between voter registration and voter turnout in Hawaii has been widening. In 2014, just over half of all registered voters cast a ballot. During the 2012 presidential election, the last time Hawaii-born Barack Obama was on the ballot, turnout was 61 percent. The data represents voter registration and turnout for the general election every two years.



Source: [Hawaii Office of Elections](#) [Get the data](#)

Created with [Datawrapper](#)

About 11 percent of registrants for the general election are on [the “failsafe” list](#), meaning they haven’t voted in two election cycles. They might have moved, died or gone to prison since the last election — or they’re just not bothering to vote — but are kept on roles until the state’s counties can confirm whether they should be purged.

Nationwide, voter registration and turnout rates usually increase during presidential election years, the U.S. Department of Commerce [reports](#). The high-profile national election draws more people to the polls.

But political analysts Milner and Moore don't think that explains this year's spike in Hawaii's voter registration.

“Locally, the races haven't been that exciting. Even the mayoral race has been rather blasé.” — Alex Santiago

“The presidential election has not really touched this place at all,” Milner said.

Instead, they credit the new option of online registration.

Social media has helped as well.

In September, Facebook featured a landing page linking its users to their state's online voting registration application.

“That was probably the most effective get-out-the-vote initiative I've ever seen,” said Honolulu City Clerk Glen Takahashi, who's been working in Hawaii's elections since 1992. He said that typically 1,600 new registrants are added to voter roles statewide every month. Within four days of the Facebook campaign, Takahashi saw 4,000 to 5,000 new registrations.

Other states saw [comparable increases](#) as a result of the Facebook voter registration initiative.

Historically, spikes in Hawaii's voter registration rates have coincided with changes in the registration process. But making it easier to register doesn't mean people will actually vote.

None of the top three highest increases in registration – in 1972, 1996, and 1998 – resulted in significantly higher turnout rates.

In 1972, the 26th amendment lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. Voter registration in Hawaii increased by about 16 percent – the highest increase in the state's history. But turnout actually decreased slightly from the previous election.

aigns
on
[Hawaii](#)

In 1996 and 1998, registration increased from the previous election year by 12 and 11 percent respectively. Neither year saw significantly higher turnout rates.

[Hawaii](#)

ir source

, state

The spikes were likely effects of the [National Voter Registration Act](#), Takahashi said. Passed by Congress in 1993, the act requires states to offer citizens an opportunity to register when applying for or renewing a driver's license and at various public assistance offices.

In 2018, the state will offer same-day registration thanks to [House Bill 2590](#), which was signed into law in 2014.

In 2010, people over 65 made up 22 percent of registered voters. This year, they make up 26 percent.

“The population here has gotten older,” Milner said, “and old people are more likely to vote.”

The state's Office of Elections also has outreach initiatives at care and nursing homes, reminding Hawaii's senior citizens they can both register and vote through the mail.

“Hawaii's kupuna are more involved in the political system,” says Alex Santiago, program director for No Vote No Grumble, a nonpartisan civic engagement initiative. “They are probably most afraid of what may happen if they're not involved.”

MORE WOMEN ARE REGISTERING TO VOTE THAN MEN

More women than men in Hawaii have registered to vote in the last four election cycles despite the fact that women make up a smaller share of the total population. Overall voter registration has been increasing since 2010.

2010

Male 330,551

Female 360,197

2012

Male 336,938

Female 368,730

2014

Male 337,293

Female 369,597

2016

Male 357,498

Female 392,419

Source: Honolulu Office of the City Clerk [Get the data](#)

Created with [Datawrapper](#)



People dependent on Medicare and pension funds become involved, he explained, because they are more dependent on the government for these programs.

Young people are generally less involved in local and national elections, a trend typical across the U.S.

In Hawaii, the number of people 18-29 on the state's voter roles decreased between 2010 and 2014, as more failsafe registrants were purged from the list than new registrants added.

"College students are a group that typically doesn't vote," said Nicole Brodie of Kanu Hawaii, a local nonprofit with get-out-to-vote initiatives. "They think that their vote doesn't matter."

“That was probably the most effective get-out-the-vote initiative I’ve ever seen.” —

This year has been different. Of the 43,027 new registered voters, 8,455 people – or 20 percent of the total – were in the 18-29 age group.

Glen Takahashi, Honolulu city clerk, referring to a Facebook voter registration push

campaign appealed to younger voters.

“That’s the Bernie bump,” Brodie said, referring to former Democratic presidential candidate and current Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, whose

Fifty-nine percent of this election year’s new registrants in the 18-29 ages group are women.

Meda Chesney-Lind, a professor of Women’s Studies at the University of Hawaii, attributes this to the rising levels of academic achievement among women.

“If you look at college enrollment, women are now the majority of our students in college, well over 50 percent,” she said. “It doesn’t surprise me that young women are more civically engaged than their male counterparts.”

Chesney-Lind said 55.9 percent of the University of Hawaii’s student body this school year is female.

In every election cycle since 2010, women of all age groups have consistently made up 52 percent of Hawaii’s registered voters, but only 49 percent of the state’s total population of voting-aged citizens, according to [census data](#).

Chesney-Lind also offered explanations specific to this year’s presidential election.

“Women have a lot of stake in this election,” she said. One candidate might be the country’s first female president while the other has “expressed misogynistic attitudes.”

Interest in local elections is hard to gauge, but [record low turnout](#) at this year’s primary suggests people aren’t that engaged.

“Locally, the races haven’t been that exciting” Santiago said. “Even the mayoral race has been rather blasé.”

Follow Civil Beat on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). You can also sign up for Civil Beat’s free [daily newsletter](#).

About the Author



CIVIL BEAT STAFF

Natanya Friedheim   

Natanya Friedham is an intern at Civil Beat. You can reach her at natanya@civilbeat.org or follow her on Twitter at @natanya_hnl.

Use the RSS feed to subscribe to Natanya Friedheim's posts today



Show Comments

 **COMMENTS (19)**

LOG IN

Post your comment...

SUBMIT

Sort comments by

Highest rated



Aiko Kealoha *2 days ago*

Mahalo for this piece. Although I disagree with Professor Milner (making it easier for people to register overtime does increase participation), I found this an interesting look on where registration has increased and consideration of various factors.

My only suggestion would be to avoid the trap that others have fallen into when comparing Hawaii's voter turnout to nationwide averages. While General turnout is low, Primary turnout is one of the highest in the Nation. 2016 primary: Hawaii saw 34.7% turnout compared to 28.5% nationwide. Even that was considered high for the nation, which usually hovers in the teens for primaries. It may be interesting to consider the reasons why (e.g. many contests are determined in the primaries in Hawaii; Hawaii votes have little if any impact on Presidential general elections); however, it is important to make the distinction. Participation is not nearly as dismal as the picture is often painted.

4



Aiko Kealoha *2 days ago*

Hawaii Primary 34.7% turnout: <http://www.staradvertiser.com/2016/08/13/breaking-news/no-major-problems-reported-as-polls-open-across-state/>

Nationwide Primary 28.5% turnout (with that being the second highest in at least the last 10 presidential elections): <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/10/turnout-was-high-in-the-2016-primary-season-but-just-short-of-2008-record/>

1



Joshua Scott *2 days ago*

"One candidate might be the country's first female president while the other has 'expressed misogynistic attitudes.'" What about the third candidate? Why will no one ever talk about Gary Johnson.

1



StanleyWang808 *2 days ago*

Vote Yaqoob, for Prosecutor! We can't have another 4 years of Kaneshiro.



Keala Kaanui *2 days ago*

Takahashi meant (I assume) that was the best 'voter registration efforts' I have ever seen. One of the interesting things the charter commission revealed this year was that the city clerks have a duty to register people, but not to get them to vote. There was a proposal to add that to their duties, but alas, it was dropped. Amazing since the charter commission kept so many other proposals on the ballot.



DannyBoyEsposito *2 days ago*

Vote for Yaqoob! Yaqoob for City Prosecutor. We can't have another four years of Kaneshiro.

1



Pono Keali'i *2 days ago*

There is a "dirty little secret" that may well be a major contributing factor to the declining Hawai'i voter turnout rate in recent years which the State of Hawaii is either reluctant to acknowledge or unwilling to admit. I'm talking about the thousands of

Hawaiians who see themselves as subjects of the Kingdom of Hawai'i, NOT US citizens, and support Hawai'i's deoccupation and restoration.

They understand that neither the US government nor the illegal state of Hawai'i are serious about deoccupying Hawai'i or restoring it's lawful Kingdom of Hawai'i government, the Hawaiian Monarchy.

There have always been Hawaiians who have staunchly refused to participate in the activities of the illegal puppet state of Hawai'i or of its master the US government. Now we're seeing that the number of Hawai'i citizens that identify as Hawaiian subjects and are choosing to work toward deoccupying and restoring Hawai'i is growing larger every year.

Hawaiians are choosing restoration over occupation !



Natanya Friedheim 2 days ago

Hi Pono,

Thank you for reading, and for bringing that up! I was really focused on looking at voter registration by age and gender in this article but there is definitely a lot to explore in terms of attitudes about voting among native Hawaiians. That would definitely constitute its own article, or an entire book!



Richard Johnson Esq. 2 days ago

In reply to:

There is a "dirty little secret" that may well be a major contributing factor to the declining Hawai'i voter turnout rate in recent years which the State of Hawaii is either reluctant to...

— Pono Keali'i

There is a 'dirty little secret' that may well be a major contributing factor to the declining Hawai'i voter turnout rate in recent years.

Based upon the 2010 census 6% of the residents of Hawaii self identified as "Native Hawaiian".

The non-participation of such a small number of residents could hardly be " a major contributing factor to the declining Hawai'i voter turnout rate".



ponokeali'i 2 days ago

In reply to:

Hi Pono, Thank you for reading, and for bringing that up! I was really focused on looking at voter registration by age and gender in this article but there is definitely a lot to explore in terms...

— Natanya Friedheim

hi Natanya,

mahalo for acknowledging that Hawaiians who consider themselves subjects of the kingdom of Hawai'i and are having an effect on the steadily dwindling numbers of Hawai'i residents that are conscientiously choosing not to participate in either state of Hawai'i or US federal elections.

We're seeing a steadily growing interest from Hawai'i residents of every ethnicity, even those that are not direct descendants of the original Polynesian settlers of Hawai'i, in support of the struggle to deoccupy and restore Hawai'i.

The exact number of aloha aina, Hawaiian patriots, and supporters of Hawai'i's restoration is not known but we DO know that our numbers are increasing by the growing support and encouragement we are seeing for our cause.

I've recently been asked to join a reinstated political and diplomatic organization chartered by Kamehameha V as a minister of information. I'll be sure to add you to our list of media contacts. mahalo.

ponokeali'i

ali'i aloha aina



ponokeali'i 2 days ago

In reply to:

There is a 'dirty little secret' that may well be a major contributing factor to the declining Hawai'i voter turnout rate in recent years. Based upon the 2010 census 6% of the residents of Hawaii...

— Richard Johnson Esq.

mahalo for your reply Richard. I'd like to point out something that should be rather obvious.

That is the fact that anyone who seriously considers themselves to be subjects of the Kingdom of Hawai'i would NOT be willing to participate in a US census. May I suggest that the 6% number that you cite may in fact represent people who consider

themselves to be Hawaiian subjects but have not yet chosen to fully renounce their unlawfully imposed US citizenship in exchange for their rightful Hawaiian citizenship.

There is also the fact that the US Census is conducted every 10 years and that so much has occurred in just the last 6 years since the last US Census that would encourage the number of Hawai'i residents who formerly considered themselves to be US citizens to now rightly see themselves as Hawaiian citizens and subjects of the Hawaiian Monarchy.

the Hawaiian tide has definitely turned. Hawai'iki is rising once more !

ponokeali'i

ali'i aloha aina



Richard Johnson Esq. *1 day ago*

"I'd like to point out something that should be rather obvious..."

Indeed! And all of this occurred simultaneously with the approval of the use of marijuana for "medicinal" purposes.

What a coincidence !!!

1



ponokeali'i *14 hours ago*

Richard, the great strides that aloha aina are making daily in the international political and diplomatic arena are not covered by either American or Hawaiian mainstream media. Everything will be revealed within the very near future.

I guarantee you that the impending deoccupation and restoration of Hawai'i will catch most Americans by surprise but aloha aina have known of the coming restoration for some time now.

prepare to be shocked and amazed !



Richard Johnson Esq. *6 hours ago*

Aloha Ponokeali'i

I do so look forward to the reintroduction of the Monarchy. Pray tell who will be your King? Do have a picture of him that you can share?

I want to start making t-shirts to sell outside Honolulu Hale.

Mahalo



Richard Johnson Esq. *2 days ago*

Insightful and objective analysis. One wonders how Hawaii compares with one effectively one-party states, whether Democratic or Republican.

If a voter perceives that the contest has already been decided given previous election results, the desire to cast a me too ballot would be marginal at best.

1



Natanya Friedheim *2 days ago*

Hi Richard, that did come up in conversation with one of my interviewees who referred to Massachusetts as a state with the vast majority of Democrat senators and also a high voter turnout rate.

1



Richard Johnson Esq. *2 days ago*

Aloha Ms. Friedheim:

Ironically I lived in Boston for a good many years prior to moving to Hawaii.

Based upon my time in the Commonwealth it is a bit of an outlier in the one party state category. Massachusetts has an odd habit of electing Republican governors whist voting the balance of the slate Democratic.

Charlie Baker the current Governor is a Republican as were Mitt Romney, Jane Swift, Paul Celluci, and Bill Weld. These Republicans, other than Baker who was elected in 2015, served between 1991 and 2007. This is not ancient history.

In my humble opinion the high turnout in the Commonwealth is due to the fact that the state's highest office is constantly in play, a situation not found in other one party states.

1



Frank DeGiacomo *2 days ago*

People still need to be registered to vote in the primaries here, so people do get registered to do that, regardless of whether it's a one party state.



Richard Johnson Esq. *1 day ago*

Your supposition is hardly borne out by the facts. Voter turnout at primary elections is always lower than that at the general elections. The same holds true about off-year elections as compared to Presidential election years.

Facts are stubborn things.

1

[PRIVACY](#) [TERMS](#)

SUPPORT NONPROFIT, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM TODAY!

I would like to donate

\$ 10

One-Time Monthly Yearly

DONATE NOW

 Secured by **stripe**

If your organization would like to make a donation, please contact us at business@civilbeat.org.

Prefer to mail a check? Our mailing address is 3465 Waialae Avenue, Suite 200, Honolulu, HI 96816.

