

HAWAII

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Lawmakers Hope To Resuscitate Voter Turnout With All-Mail Elections

Under a Senate bill, the new approach would be phased in starting with Kauai. It would go statewide by 2022.

FEBRUARY 16, 2016 • By Courtney Teague   

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Imagine an Election Day with no polling places.

A growing number of Hawaii voters — 56 percent in the last primary — already request early ballots so they can vote from the comfort of their own homes and then mail in their ballots. But now there's legislation, [Senate Bill 2496](#), to phase in all-mail balloting in the islands.

Oregon, Colorado and Washington already have all-mail voting.

Oregon [switched in 1998](#), and more people seem to cast ballots as a result. In the 2014 general election, Oregon's voter turnout was 70.9 percent — about 34 points higher than Hawaii's.

The bill calls for phasing in all-mail elections, starting with Kauai. In the 2018 primary, Hawaii and Maui counties would transition to the new system. By the 2022 primary, all-mail voting would be statewide.



A vote-by-mail box in Olympia, Washington

In May 2013, representatives from the Hawaii [Office of Elections](#), Maui, Kauai and Honolulu visited two smaller counties in Oregon to observe the state's voting process. A report from the Office of Elections said Oregon officials were "genuinely excited about their work" and finding ways they could continue to improve voter accessibility.

Sen. Donna Mercado Kim, one introducer of SB 2496, said the bill would make voting easier for those who can't leave their homes, such as the disabled or elderly.

The current draft of the bill, carried over from last year, was a "session's worth of discussion" and revisions to combine other bills about mail-in elections, she said.

Kim also broached the possibility of online voting in the future in order to continue modernizing the election system, although the federal government hasn't yet [found a method](#) that it deems safe from hackers.

“We need to make (voting) accessible and as simple as possible in today’s day and age,” Kim said. “We need to move up with the times ... to keep up with technology.”



Election Night vote-counting might go quicker with more ballots in hand early.

Scott Nago, the state’s chief elections officer, said his office evaluated the costs of mail-in voting after purchasing necessary equipment and found that more than \$800,000 could be saved per election cycle.

The Office of Elections has “always been in favor of mail-in voting for logistical reasons as well as turnout reasons,” Nago said.

In all-mail voting under SB 2496, ballots would need to be mailed in or dropped off on Election Day or sooner to deposit-only locations. Voter service centers, which could issue replacement ballots or provide more accessible voting equipment, would be open on Election Day in each county to receive ballots or assist voters with special needs.

Voters would also be allowed to request an electronic ballot, which could involve faxing

or an online delivery system, if a mail-in ballot had not been received five days before the election.

This isn't the first try at all-mail balloting in Hawaii.

Similar efforts failed last year. Also in 2015, [one bill](#) was introduced that would have made Nago responsible for increasing voter turnout, while [another](#) would have gone so far as to levy \$100 fines registered voters without a valid excuse for missing an election.



Nathan Eagle/Civil Beat

Hawaii Election Chief Scott Nago talks to reporters in August 2014.

In 2012, 42.3 percent of Hawaii voters participated in the primary and 61.9 percent in the general election, which included a presidential election. In the 2014 elections, participation dropped with 41.5 percent of voters casting ballots in the primary and 52.3 percent in the general election.

Voter turnout wasn't always so low in Hawaii.

Data from 1953, when Hawaii was still a U.S. territory, shows 84.4 percent of registered voters showed up for the primary, and 93.6 percent for the general election.

Voter turnout is "a bigger problem than something this office could solve," Nago said. "It's not strictly related to the election system."

He said his office is responsible for the mechanics of voting, but it can only do so much to increase turnout.

"I think (the importance of voting) needs to start in the schools," Nago said. "I don't believe civic duty is taught anymore."

A hearing on SB 2496 is scheduled in the Senate Judiciary and Labor Committee on Tuesday at 9:30 a.m. in Conference Room 016.

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About the Author



CIVIL BEAT STAFF

Courtney Teague [Twitter](#) [Email](#) [RSS](#)

Courtney Teague is an intern for Civil Beat. You can reach her by email at cteague@civilbeat.com

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**Kenneth Conklin** · University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Hawaii voters are being herded like sheep to vote by mailed absentee ballots, and eventually to vote electronically through the internet. Holding elections that way would save a lot of money, produce immediate final results the moment the "polls" close, and be extremely convenient for voters. It might increase the dismal percentage of registered voters who actually vote.

But would abolishing election-day in-person voting be in the best interests of individual voters? Would it open the door to fraudulent vote-counting through electronic or procedural skullduggery at election headquarters or by... [See More](#)

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Lawmakers can increase voter turnout by being transparent and doing what they say they will do. Voters distrust government because there's a big gap between what candidates say they will do when they're campaigning and what they actually do after they're elected. Too many people find out they didn't get what they voted for, and they feel that their vote has been wasted. The next time, they don't vote. More people will vote if they feel they can influence what government does.

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