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Like other states, Hawaii may go to all-mail voting

By [Richard Borreca](#)

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Hawaii is edging closer to becoming an all-vote-by-mail state, thanks to the strong support of state Senate Democratic leaders.

Last week, Senate Bill 287 easily cleared the Senate and moved to the House.

Senate President Donna Kim said vote by mail legislation was one of her top bills this year. It appears to be getting support from both community groups and the government officials who would run the system.

Across the country, especial in the west, vote by mail is growing in popularity. A new Pew Research Center survey found that 29 percent of U.S. voters voted absentee or by mail in last year's general election, and out west, it was 51 percent.

Voting officials like vote by mail because they don't have to find, reserve and staff the usual polling places, nor train and pay the hundreds of precinct officials needed.

Oregon, the first state to go to an only-vote-by-mail system, had some early successes, with general election turnouts of 60 and 70 percent.

Hawaii's Senate version of the vote-by-mail elections proposal would be phased in by county. Kauai would go next year, followed by Maui and the Big Island in 2018, with Oahu following in 2020.

"In addition to making voting easier and more convenient, elections by mail could boost voter turnout, streamline the administration of elections, and provide cost savings," according to the Senate Ways and Means Committee's report endorsing the

plan.

Just as important, the bill won approval of the state's Office of Elections and the county clerks of both Kauai and Maui. There were some cautions about needing additional support, and the committee noted "that the transition to statewide elections by mail will be a major undertaking that necessitates planning and incremental implementation."

When Colorado in 2013 became the third state to decide that it would mail every registered voter in the state a ballot instead of open polling places, Dickey Lee Hullinghorst, the Colorado House majority leader called vote by mail "the wave of the future because it is so much more easy and economical."

Supporters also hope that vote by mail will help remedy Hawaii's low voter turnout, but so far the national statistics are fuzzy. It has helped in some big elections in Colorado, Washington and Oregon, but in some smaller elections, such as primary races, vote by mail has not been a factor.

The one concern here offered by both the League of Women Voters and Common Cause is that the new proposal does away with the recently enacted same-day voter registration law.

Carmille Lim, Common Cause executive director, said in testimony, that Hawaii needs the late registration law.

"Culturally, there is a saying called 'Hawaiian time'; it's common knowledge that in Hawaii, many people procrastinate. While it may be ideal to encourage people to register to vote and vote early, this is an unrealistic expectation," Lim said.

She made sense by urging the Legislature to take both vote by mail and same-day registration.

"Implementing such a model will propel Hawaii to become one of the 'model states' when it comes to voting modernization," said Lim.

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