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Hawaii News

Low voter turnout not unique to islands

By [B.J. Reyes](#)

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DENNIS ODA / 2014

In terms of registered voters, Hawaii had a record-low turnout of 52.3 percent in 2014. Beginning next year, voters will be able to register at absentee polling sites.

As attention begins to form on the race for the White House in 2016, local political observers say they are hopeful the presidential election and a move toward easier voter registration can begin to improve Hawaii's traditionally low voter turnout rate.

A look at one recent analysis of the 2014 midterm elections nationally showed some improvement in Hawaii's voter turnout, but experts say the numbers can be

misleading.

Hawaii ranked toward the middle of the pack in voter turnout, 32nd among all states plus Washington, D.C., with a rate of 36.5 percent of eligible voters casting ballots in November, according to the analysis by Boston-based Nonprofit Vote.

Indiana had the lowest turnout of eligible voters, 28.8 percent, followed by Texas, 28.9 percent, and New York, 29 percent.

Maine had the highest turnout at 58.5 percent.

"That doesn't necessarily mean our voting rates are increasing; it means others are going down," said John Hart, chairman of the communication department at Hawaii Pacific University. "It's not that we're getting out of the bottom, it's that more people are joining us there.

"You can take a step back and say that although we can talk about variables unique to Hawaii, it's now, clearly, a national problem and we're not the worst."

The survey studied eligible voters — U.S. citizens over the age of 18 who meet the criteria to be able to cast a ballot.

In terms of registered voters — eligible citizens who take the extra step to register to vote — Hawaii set a record low with a turnout of 52.3 percent in 2014.

Carmille Lim, the executive director of advocacy group Common Cause Hawaii, noted that eligible voters make up a larger group than those who actually register, making the comparison somewhat misleading.

Still, she said Hawaii is viewed positively by groups such as Common Cause because of attempts to increase access to voting, compared to other states that appear to be curbing voter participation.

"I feel like we are slowly progressing," she said recently. "But again, we're looked at as a model state not because we've made particularly great strides, but because other states have repealed a lot of voter access and voter rights."

Hart said the states at the bottom of the Nonprofit Vote survey are among those that have passed fairly stringent voter identification laws. Critics say such laws disenfranchise minorities, the elderly, students and the disabled, many of whom lack a photo ID and are unable to navigate administrative burdens to obtain one. Other states have curbed absentee voting or restricted access to early voting.

Hawaii, meanwhile, is expanding access.

Beginning next year, voters will be able to register at absentee polling sites, which open two weeks before the day of an election. Same-day voting registration is set to begin in 2018. The moves were passed in 2014, after years of dismally low voter

turnout rates.

Of the top 10 states in the Nonprofit Vote survey, seven allow same-day registration. Advocates say studies show same-day registration can increase turnout by up to 10 percent.

"The question is: How much do these conveniences simply substitute?" Hart said. "In other words, with more liberal absentee balloting or same-day registration, does that actually increase the number of voters or does it just make it easier for the people that are already voting? We'll have to take a look at that data and see."

Lim said she feels the new access shows promise.

"I think we'll get a bump, but we'll also have to look at how many new candidates run for office — how competitive are our races, things like that," she said.

VOTER TURNOUT HIGHS AND LOWS

A ranking of states, plus Washington, D.C., with highest and lowest rates of voter turnout in the 2014 midterm elections based on official voter turnout data reported by state election offices and collected by the U.S. Elections Project. The ratings use the most up-to-date estimate of the voting-eligible population for each state using data from the U.S. Census and other government sources.

HIGHEST

1. Maine	58.5 percent
2. Wisconsin	56.8
3. Colorado	54.5
4. Alaska	54.4
5. Oregon	53.5
6. Minnesota	50.5
7. Iowa	50.2
8. New Hampshire	48.4
9. Montana	47.3
10. Louisiana	45.1
32. Hawaii	36.5 percent

LOWEST

42. West Virginia	31.8
43. California	30.8
44. Oklahoma	30.4
45. Utah	30.2

46. Mississippi	29.5
47. Nevada	29.3
48. Tennessee	29.1
49. New York	29.0
50. Texas	28.9
51. Indiana	28.8

National average: 36.6 percent

Source: Nonprofit Vote