

## HAWAII

# Neal Milner: Getting Serious About Voter Turnout in Hawaii

Incremental improvements are better than ambitious solutions when it comes to getting people to vote.

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With campaign season in full swing, we'll soon be hearing the usual well-meaning but ineffective admonishments and pleas about low voter turnout in Hawaii.

And low it is, last in the nation for every presidential election since at least 2000. In the last 50 or so years Hawaii has moved from first to last.

The trouble is that the business-as-usual ways of trying to raise turnout here don't work and for good reason.

These methods don't work anywhere else either.

These well-meaning but scatter shot efforts in Hawaii show little knowledge about what works best and ignore the ample research dealing with this.

Efforts to increase turnout here have traditionally been sporadic and poorly funded. No organization has taken or been given the responsibility of sustaining voter-turnout projects over the long term.

There are much better strategies available.

In the late 1990s, when the development of modern methods of increasing voter

turnout was still in its infancy, two Yale political scientists organized a field experiment that tested different ways of getting people to vote.

It was a pioneering effort that has become a model. Their story is wonderfully reported in Sasha Issenberg's book "The Victory Lab." (If you want to learn about the complexities of modern campaigning in an engaging way, read his book.)

Those two Yale social scientists carefully tested the effect of phone calls, direct personal contact, and mailers. They also tried a variety of messages within each of these contact methods.

The way that they measured the success of each method was as important as the methods themselves. These field experiments worked very much like a well-designed scientific experiment. Matched groups of voters received different kinds of turnout information and appeals. A control group got nothing.

These professors convinced a local League of Women Voters chapter in Connecticut to sponsor the field test, which gave the study a non-partisan halo. A foundation put up \$50,000 to pay for it.

The results were remarkable because at the time they showed some very clear effects, many of which were counterintuitive.

The most definitive finding was that phone appeals had virtually no impact while the turnout within the group receiving face-to-face personal appeals increased by almost 9 percent.

That was just the beginning of an upsurge in knowledge about how to get people to vote, and today, thanks to a huge increase in turnout research and political candidates' eagerness to learn from and use the results, we know a lot more than we did during those Connecticut days.

As Issenberg puts it, there is now a whole new "intellectual infrastructure" regarding voter turnout.

This new approach is based on results showing that carefully chosen small things can

make a difference. This new way of thinking about turnout rests on the now well-tested assumption that even though there are the broad, structural and relatively stable forces that limit turnout — like age, social class, level of cynicism about government, and the frequency of highly contested races — it is still possible to increase the percentage of eligible voters who cast ballots by using some small but effective interventions that can make a difference.

If you are a baseball fan, think of small ball.

Or think of the fight against cancer as an analogy. There are some very broad and hard to change environmental and social factors that affect cancer rates, but there are still ways to both treat the symptoms and change behavior even as these factors continue to exist or to be unknown.

This new approach to turnout, now supported by much more evidence, emphasizes that typically people choose to vote not as a civic duty or as a rational policy response based on maximizing one's needs. You've all experienced those patriotic duty and it's-in-your-self-interest harangues.

It's now quite clear that blanket emails, though cheap, are ineffective — low cost but with miniscule results. Fancy mailers also don't work although no-frill mailers in plain white envelopes do.

Admonishing people to vote also has little effect.

Instead people appear to be most effectively influenced to vote the same way that they are influenced to do other forms of socially desirable actions.

That is what [Hawaii Energy](#), the publicly funded energy efficiency effort, is trying to do when it sends you a letter showing how much electricity you used compared to your neighbors.

One of the most effective ways to get a person to vote is to mail or show her a list of her voting history — as well as her neighbors' — along with a message that she, as well as her neighbors, will get another such list after the coming election.

That method has been controversial. In one of the early attempts to do this, the folks running the project got enough angry you're-bullying-me calls and emails to convince them to discontinue that method. Nevertheless, it turned out to be quite effective despite its early cutoff.

Other less extreme methods along these same lines have also been shown to work. Even simply publicizing the past history without the threat of following up after the election increases turnout.

None of these works at all times in all places. That is why it is so essential to have assessments built into the efforts. A good turnout operation needs to be able to measure cost effectiveness — the cost per voter added.

The Connecticut effort is still the model for voter turnout endeavors because that approach includes a way of testing what you are trying.

Imagine a project in Hawaii that would follow the Connecticut model and would both attempt and assess turnout methods that have worked elsewhere. It would require people going door to door to make personal contact, communications specialists who developed various approaches to use, and experienced assessors.

There are three possible ways of doing this.

One is to rely on the candidates themselves. Right now in fact, candidates carry out the most effective and reflective turnout efforts, especially in big-ticket elections.

The problem is that those partisans are quite rightly not interested in increasing turnout overall. That is not their job. They are interested only in increasing turnout among their own supporters and often in suppressing the turnout of everyone else.

Another alternative would turn over the responsibility to Hawaii's state government, but it's safe to say that right now no agency in state government has this capacity, the will, or the funds. And it would be a really bad idea to broaden the mission of a state Office of Elections that has trouble grasping the concept that the number of available ballots should equal the number of voters.

The best alternative depends on using Hawaii civic organization dedicated to raising the overall level of civic engagement, like the League of Women Voters or Common Cause, to spearhead this effort.

(I am a member of the Common Cause board of directors, but these are my personal opinions and have never been endorsed or even discussed by that board.)

Kanu Hawaii may be the organization with the best potential for doing this because it has run voter registration drives in the past that by Hawaii standards were extremely well organized. What Kanu, as well as any other group, needs to make this go is money.

Federal tax laws allow good government groups to support voter drives as long as the organization doesn't advocate in favor of a particular candidate.

Even so, the funds for such a project would have to come from private foundations or civic-minded philanthropists.

This strategy will not turn things around in a dramatic way. The state is not going to jump from its 44 percent turnout in the 2012 presidential race to the 70-plus percent in the highest-turnout states or even to the 59 percent national average.

In fact it is late to mount a full-scale turnout project in time for the 2014 elections. The Legislature recently passed bills that make voter registration easier. Those should help a little, but the really significant change, the ability to register to vote on the day of an election, does not take effect until 2018.

The long-term turnout problem is certainly not going to go away by itself. The sooner that people begin to plan the difficult, piecemeal, continuous but systematic slog needed to increase turnout, the better.

Even with a good plan, the changes will come gradually, but an increase of a couple of percentage points that continues to grow over time is significant, certainly better than the unproductive cycle of despair and moralizing that is the case now.

And what does it say about Hawaii's commitment to democracy if people here continue to rely on the same bromides over and over, even though they don't work?

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## About the Author



COLUMNIST

### Neal Milner

Neal Milner is a former political science professor at the University of Hawaii where he taught for 40 years. He is a political analyst for KITV and is a regular contributor to Hawaii Public Radio's ["The Conversation."](#) His most recent book is [The Gift of Underpants.](#)

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8 Comments

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**Tara DeWitt Coomans** · Founder/Pack Leader at Poodle Mafia

I'm really enjoying your pieces Neil, thank you. I've read the study you mention here and several others about voter motivation as well. Do you think that these studies equally apply across generations? I've also been doing quite a bit of reading about Millennials, and it doesn't seem as though they will be inspired by the traditional "civic duty" motivation. Thoughts?

Like · Reply · May 8, 2014 11:12am



**Neal Milner** · Honolulu, Hawaii

Tara, thanks. I can't answer your very interesting question with a lot of confidence. I am pretty sure the mechanisms I mention work for all ages, but i don't know whether they work differently among age groups. Older people have higher turnouts at least partially because they are already attached to politics in the sense that they have paid taxes, etc. So the task of attracting younger [people to vote is harder. Still, as I say, the basic strategies I discussed probably work for all age groups, albeit with different degrees of success.

Like · Reply · 1 · May 8, 2014 1:09pm



**John Kawamoto**

A high voting percentage is an indicator that people are engaged with government. It shows that they feel that they have a say in electing public officials who can affect the issues that are important in their lives because the democratic form of government works. It shows that they feel that elections really work.

The most effective way of increasing the voting percentage is to strengthen the connection between people and government. Efforts that are limited to increasing the voting percentage without that connection are meaningless and futile. As Milner says, it's only treating the sy... See More

Like · Reply ·  4 · May 8, 2014 12:52pm



**Rick Toledo** · Trumbull High School

John, I agree with you except for the Citizens United decision. Hawaii had a low voter turnout long before Citizens United. IMHO, Hawaii has a low voter turnout, in addition to the points you stated, because there is also very little difference in candidate's platforms. "They all sound alike" is what is most commonly expressed. Any candidate daring to offer something different than what is commonly expected in Hawaii politics is buried by well financed established candidates and the local media. What is needed is the "loyal opposition", something Republicans have not been willing to do.

Like · Reply · May 8, 2014 9:44pm



**John Kawamoto**

Rick Toledo, You're correct that low interest in voting preceded Citizens United, which just made things worse. You're also correct that Republicans haven't been able to offer much to Hawaii's voters. All they seem to do is complain that voters should like them more in order to preserve our democratic form of government (see Gene Ward's comments). But that's like forcing a consumer to buy "Cheer" when they like "Tide." The free market Republicans should know that they have to offer a better product and stop behaving like Marxists. Republicans are stuck on opposing same sex marriage, and it is making them less and less relevant because younger voters are overwhelmingly in favor of it. In time, Republicans will become extinct because they have not evolved with the changing social environment.

Like · Reply · May 9, 2014 10:16am



**Evan Tector** · Honolulu, Hawaii

Good perspectives above. Yes, the left/right dynamic does not apply to Hawaii as local Dems fully encompass the corporatist center on economic policy and the relatively more tolerant center on social issues. (sociologic remnant of post-statehood enfranchisement of ethnic groups) The social issue divide strategy offers local Repubs only marginal leverage, despite the small but active religious right. Many local Dems that represent districts with high proportions of social regressives incorporate and co-opt those positions into their platforms or use positional ambiguity or code messages to slid... See More

Like · Reply · May 11, 2014 5:36pm



**Andy Parx**

Getting good information might help to see whether recent efforts are going to work. I've set some stock in the "permanent absentee" provisions whereby voters sign up once and then get their ballots in the mail each election without having to do anything else ever again. Isolating the "turnout" as it were of those permanent absentees to see if their rate is higher than the norm would show if it's a good use of resources to get people to sign up for it. But I don't see those statistics coming out of OOE. I imagine making voting "routine" - like paying a bill- would at least help, perhaps greatly.

Like · Reply ·  1 · May 8, 2014 3:33pm



**Rick Tubania** · University of Hawaii at Manoa

many people complain about low voter turnouts, but what is the real effect of this? Did the wrong person get elected or some other real and measurably consequence? I have not heard anything. It may be unpatriotic that some people don't vote but I have not see anyone who has not voted complain about not having being represented by the people who were elected by the voters. when someone fails to do something, he or she does not care about the issue nor the consequences of their action or inaction. is this bad? if someone does not care about anything then why should others care? Will a 100% vote make the governmental process better? will a 100% turnout destroy the power of special interests? doubt it. hence, there is only a lot of noise being made but without any real consequence - life goes on and government continues to try to do what it should do, but sometimes not.

Like · Reply · May 8, 2014 4:01pm



**Peter Easterling** · U of hawaii

After reading the article twice there were 2 suggestions to improve voter turn-out: 1) face-to face contact and 2) mailing or showing voter histories, usually including the voting of your neighbors. The latter strategy, it was acknowledged, was called off after angry responses. Such bullying tactics might succeed to some small degree but would not work well in the long run. In fact it strikes me as an outrageous invasion of privacy. Face-to-face contact evidently is effective but would take an army of trained personnel. Impractical. My sense is that disaffection and disenfranchisement are the main reasons. Backroom shenanigans, sweetheart insider deals, endless height "exception," gut and replace legislation, corruption, all of which been on lurid display in Hawaii in recent history, have turned my adult children into non-voters.

Like · Reply · 1 · May 8, 2014 5:07pm



**Kealii Makekahu**

Mandate airtime both media and print for the candidates for there views hell OHA pays for it sometimes but only promotes itself via there own newspaper so as to give the appearance there doing something but keeping the same old trustees safe from scrutiny.

Like · Reply · 1 · May 8, 2014 5:54pm



**Gene Ward** · Member at Hawaii House of Representatives

Neal, As usual you provide the intellectual grist for tackling such a complex and troubling problem in Hawaii. Thank you for your contribution! You mentioned just about all the variables to tweek voter turnout but you might have left out one. Don't you think there's is some kind of macro-structural dynamic in play when there is basicallt only one-party in charge? Would better checks and balances on a super-majority not increase our voter participation-maybe the same way a close football game keeps the fans in the stands from losing interest and leaving early? If just one team always wins w... [See More](#)

Like · Reply · 2 · May 8, 2014 7:40pm



**Neal Milner** · Honolulu, Hawaii

Thanks, Gene. In the article I briefly mention that lack of competitive races probably reduce turnout. So more competitive elections in Hawaii, which of course means a stronger Republican Party, would increase turnout. I did not dwell on this or other macro factors because I wanted to emphasize that those factors, however significant, are hard to change and that voter research indicates that change in turnout can take

place even with these stable factors.

Like · Reply · May 8, 2014 11:27pm



**Kimo Sutton** · P R and marketing at Presison Tune

I was Vice Chair of the elections group that preceded the elections commission-EARP. I have a degree in Poli Sci. and some background in election for 45 years. That said I have come up with a solution that we could implement if not for the groups that are so leaning towards the present structure of control Yes you are. I wrote to the LOWV about how to get a larger turnout and never got a reply.

Maybe you can further this plan. Think outside your little box. It is not the mainland.

My plan is for Hawaii.

It is a lottery with those who have voted in the general election being public informat... See More

Like · Reply · May 9, 2014 2:45pm · Edited



**John Kawamoto**

Kimo, If people have to be tempted with prizes in order to get them to vote, something is fundamentally wrong with the democracy, and it should be fixed. Raising the voting percentage by offering prizes merely masks the problem.

Like · Reply · May 10, 2014 12:33am · Edited



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