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Hawaii News

New law expands voter registration at polls

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Precinct official Paul Pereira, right, registers voters into the polling book alongside Mitsue Doi at the Kipapa Elementary school polling place.

With the state's voter turnout foundering among the lowest in the nation, a measure signed into law Monday by Gov. Neil Abercrombie could boost the state's rating by as much as 10 points by 2018, advocates say.

House Bill 2590 allows voter registration at absentee polling places beginning in 2016. Same-day voting registration would be allowed starting in 2018.

"Government should make it as easy as possible for new voters to be able to do so," state Rep. Kaniela Ing (D, Kihei-Wailea-Makena) said during a bill signing ceremony in Abercrombie's office.

He said similar legislation in other states has boosted their voter turnout rate between 6 and 9 percent, with the highest increases among young voters. Once the nation's highest, Hawaii's voter turnout cratered at 44.5 percent, the nation's lowest, in the 2012 election, according to the U.S. Elections Project.

"There are more than 270,000 people who are eligible to vote who haven't registered to vote," said Janet Mason, legislative chairwoman of the League of Women Voters of Hawaii. "We're really hopeful this will be a little boost to energize them to go and register to vote."

One concern raised during the session was of potential voter fraud, but Abercrombie noted his signing of a measure last week that makes it a felony to falsify an identity for voting purposes.

Rep. Karl Rhoads, House Judiciary Committee chairman, said the five-year jail penalty seems like a steep price to pay for a single vote "that probably will not turn the election one way or the other."

"That's a pretty big gamble," Rhoads (D, Chinatown-Iwilei-Kalihi). "It's a severe penalty for not very much gain."

The bill also appropriates \$100,000 to the state Office of Elections to prepare for implementation, which may include upgrading the registration process through the purchase of electronic poll books, the Governor's Office said.

HEALTH AND SAFETY LEGISLATION

Gov. Neil Abercrombie on Monday signed several bills into law relating to kupuna, health and human services, including:

- » Senate Bill 1233, requiring certain private employers to allow employees to take leaves of absence — including the use of sick leave, vacation or paid time off, or unpaid time off — for organ, bone marrow or peripheral blood stem cell donation.
- » SB 2300, authorizing the State Fire Council to establish statewide qualifications and procedures for testing, certifying and providing credentials to individuals who conduct maintenance and testing of portable fire extinguishers, fire protection systems and fire alarm systems.
- » SB 2346, appropriating \$6.6 million to the Department of Health for community-based services and programs for older people.
- » House Bill 2320, establishing health equity as a goal for the Health Department and requiring the department to consider social factors in assessing health needs in the

state. This is known as Loretta's Law, named for the late state Health Director Loretta Fuddy.