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Hawaii News

No-shows are higher than ever at polls

By [Gordon Y.K. Pang](#)

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CRAIG T. KOJIMA / CKOJIMA@STARADVERTISER.COM
Early voting at Manoa Elementary, Tues., Nov. 4, 2014.

Increasingly indifferent voters and a state where public life is overwhelmingly dominated by one political party contributed to a record-breaking low turnout rate of 52.3 percent in Tuesday's general election, according to several experts who spoke to the Honolulu Star-Advertiser Wednesday.

The experts also said Republicans James "Duke" Aiona, a candidate for governor, and Charles Djou, the 1st Congressional District nominee, could have benefited immensely

from higher voter turnout Tuesday.

Of 706,890 registered voters in Hawaii only 369,554 cast votes, or roughly 52.3 percent of voters. The previous low was the 52.7 percent in the 2006 general election, which was also a nonpresidential election.

Traditionally, political observers believe presidential elections lure higher numbers of voters because people want to play a role in selecting the president.

"I don't think it's just one thing here," said Colin Moore, University of Hawaii political science professor. "The classic answer here is that the elections aren't particularly competitive, the Democratic Party is dominant, and the incumbents almost always win." To the last point, Moore noted that only one incumbent lawmaker, state Rep. Karen Awana (D, Kalaeloa-Ko Olina-Maili), was defeated Tuesday.

Hawaii may be "entering this voter turnout death spiral," he said. "People turn out to vote mainly because it's a social expectation. You learn from your parents and your grandparents."

But a counterforce is apparently at work in Hawaii, Moore said.

"I think we're getting into this almost vicious cycle here where people here aren't excited about the elections, they don't vote, and then don't know many people who vote or who care much about it, and it just sort of feeds on itself."

The 41.5 percent primary election turnout was only the fourth lowest since statehood. The record primary low was the 36.9 percent recorded in 2008, a year in which the Honolulu mayor's race was the only high-profile competitive race.

Carmille Lim, executive director of Common Cause Hawaii, said the fact that the Democratic Party of Hawaii has dominated state politics for the past 60 years plays a key role in voter apathy, especially among younger adults here.

"The current system, I feel, tends to benefit incumbents, who happen to be Democrats," she said.

New voters are often young people who want to see change, she said. Several national studies concluded that younger voters who want change vote for Democrats, she said. Younger Democratic-leaning Hawaii residents may be deciding not to vote possibly because they may feel less of an urgency to go to the polls.

Lim said some may be asking themselves "'we live in a blue (Democratic) state, why should I vote?'"

The trend is troubling, she said.

"We didn't think it was possible (for voter turnout) to get lower."

On the other hand, younger Republican-leaning Hawaii voters may be disillusioned by the Democratic dominance and conclude their votes don't matter.

Hawaii Republican Party Chairwoman Pat Saiki said the explanation for the continued low turnout is multi-faceted. "Perhaps there is an atmosphere here of complacency, the feeling that this state is so dominated by one party, and that party makes all the decisions," Saiki said. "So the attitude is 'So, why vote? The same people are going to get in anyway.'"

She blamed the influence of super PACs — political action committees that can make unlimited expenditures either for or against a candidate so long as there is no coordination with a candidate's campaign — for contributing to low voter interest. Lack of balanced and fair reporting by local news organizations, whether deliberate or not, also contributes to voter apathy, she said.

Republican campaigns in major races, including Djou's bid for the 1st Congressional District seat and Aiona's gubernatorial bid, would have been more competitive with a higher turnout, Saiki said.

The outcomes "absolutely would have been a lot closer," she said, adding that more voters could have made a difference in Djou's battle with Democrat Mark Takai, who will take a seat in Congress after defeating Djou by 6,941 votes.

Rex Quidilla, a spokesman for the state Office of Elections, said changes made recently by the state Legislature may bolster voter turnout starting with the 2018 election cycle.

Beginning in 2016, Hawaii residents already "in the system" by virtue of having a driver's license or state identification card will be able to register online, he said.

Also beginning in 2016, potential voters will be able to register at early vote locations, Quidilla said.

In 2018, Hawaii residents also will be able to register at their polling places on the day of an election, a concept more commonly known as "same-day registration."

GOING TO THE POLLS

Voter turnout for the general election since 1959:

	Registered voters	Voted	Turnout Percentage
1959	183,118	171,383	93.6%
1960	202,059	188,206	93.1%
1962	221,650	200,441	90.4%
1964	239,361	216,992	90.7%
1966	253,242	221,373	87.4%
1968	274,199	239,765	87.4%

1970	291,681	247,740	84.9%
1972	337,837	286,593	84.8%
1974	343,404	272,545	79.4%
1976	363,045	309,089	85.1%
1978	395,262	292,690	74.1%
1980	402,795	318,085	79.0%
1982	405,005	325,459	80.4%
1984	418,904	349,253	83.4%
1986	419,794	344,387	82.0%
1988	444,012	368,567	83.0%
1990	453,389	354,152	78.1%
1992	464,495	382,882	82.4%
1994	488,889	377,011	77.1%
1996	544,916	370,230	67.9%
1998	601,404	412,520	68.6%
2000	637,349	371,379	58.2%
2002	676,242	385,462	57.0%
2004	647,238	431,662	66.7%
2006	662,728	348,988	52.7%
2008	691,356	456,064	66.0%
2010	690,748	385,464	55.8%
2012	705,668	437,159	61.9%
2014	706,890	369,554	52.3%

Source: State Office of Elections