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Editorial | Our View

Our right to vote is precious asset

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Around the world, totalitarian governments dictate public policy and brutal regimes quash civil rights. Ordinary citizens risk death for the chance to cast a vote, to have their say in how their sphere is governed. Not so in America, where the right to vote is a right of citizenship — hard-won in many states, but a right nonetheless.

So it is perplexing — downright shameful, really — that in this 50th State, residents are so cavalier with that right that we consistently rank at or near the bottom nationwide, when it comes to voter turnout at elections. As the landmark Voting Rights Act marks its 50th anniversary Thursday, it reminds us — compels us — to do better.

The federal Voting Rights Act of 1965, signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson at the height of the civil rights movement, prohibits racial discrimination in voting processes. It is widely considered the most effective piece of civil rights legislation ever passed by Congress, giving racial minorities, especially in the South, improved access to their right to vote.

Generally, the Act prohibits state and local governments from imposing any voting law that results in discrimination against racial or language minorities — outlawing unctuous tactics such as literacy tests to disenfranchise racial minorities, and providing a strong basis against similarly discriminatory practices such as poll taxes, gerrymandering and unfair redistricting.

Two years ago, though, the Voting Rights Act suffered when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down one of its special provisions — the coverage formula — that had long applied to states and jurisdictions known for blatant voting discrimination; these jurisdictions require federal “preclearance” approval before implementing any voting-

law changes. The high court ruled the provision unconstitutional, saying the discriminatory conditions of yesteryear no longer applied.

Alas, that dubious premise continues to be revealed to this day, by the abundance of new laws and legal cases attempting to erode the Voting Rights Act even further. Just Wednesday, for instance, an appellate court found that Texas' controversial voter ID law violates the Act's general provision against voting discrimination. In North Carolina, a federal court is weighing that state's anti-voter law, passed soon after the Supreme Court's ruling, that rolls back voter-inclusive practices such as same-day registration and a week of early voting.

Realizing such an arduous fight for equal access to voting, it's appalling that so many residents here discard their right to vote. Voters must step up. In direct contrast to North Carolina, Hawaii is making it ever-easier to register and to cast a ballot:

» Hawaii residents with a state driver's license or State ID are now able to register to vote online (www.elections.hawaii.gov); voters also can update their information and request a permanent absentee ballot online. All online submissions go through the same verification process as paper applications. And, of course, registration can still be done via paper; call 1-808-453-VOTE.

» Starting next year, voters will be able to register during early voting, to begin 10 days before an election.

» Come 2018, voter registration at polling sites on election day will be allowed.

These conveniences, though, mean little without an engaged populace. Next year is an election year, and for Hawaii, that means casting votes for U.S. president, a U.S. Senate seat and two U.S. House slots; on the local level, that includes Honolulu mayor and state legislative seats.

In our society, we have the right and privilege to have a voice in our government. Don't take it for granted.