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Publicly funded elections should be Hawaii's goal

August 9, 2015

It's ironic that as our nation marks the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act, a landmark in the ongoing battle of African-Americans to vote without barriers, Hawaii struggles to get citizens who have every opportunity to vote to go to the polls.

In last year's election, with high-stakes races for governor and U.S. senator, only 36 percent of Hawaii's eligible voters turned out — one of the lowest rates in the nation.

It continued a steady decline since the early years of statehood, when Hawaii boasted voter turnout of more than 90 percent.

Today's voter apathy is blamed mostly on Hawaii's one-party rule and the big special-interest money in politics, which leave many eligible voters feeling their ballots don't matter.

There's no question local Democrats thrive in the low-turnout environment, holding every major federal, state and county elected office, as well as super majorities in both houses of the Legislature.

But to their credit, Hawaii Democratic lawmakers have made good-faith efforts to make voting easier, unlike many red-state Republicans seeking to disenfranchise minority voters who threaten the status quo.

Since the U.S. Supreme Court in 2013 gutted key provisions of the Voting Rights Act, several states have moved to suppress minority voting with unreasonable voter ID laws and other barriers.

The Hawaii Legislature has moved in the opposite direction — if slowly at times — with

reforms making voting simpler for everybody.

Allowing permanent absentee voter status has dramatically increased mail-in voting, and registration is easier with online and Election-Day sign-ups and driver's licensing bureaus offering voter registration.

A bill for all-mail-in voting, modeled on Oregon's law that boosted participation there, stalled in the Legislature this year but likely will be resurrected.

When finishing work on this bill, Hawaii lawmakers should also consider Oregon's latest innovation: automatic voter registration and mailing of ballots to everybody of voting age issued a driver's license or state ID.

It ends registration hassles for most eligible voters once and for all, and valid voter ID is built in.

Critics claim it opens the door to abuse, but they said the same thing about mail-in voting and it hasn't happened.

Hawaii can't do much to contain the special-interest money corrupting elections after the U.S. Supreme Court opened the floodgates with its Citizens United decision, but our leaders could level the playing field by moving toward publicly funded elections.

Lawmakers have resisted this, largely because it would encourage and fund fresh candidates looking to unseat incumbents, who now easily fend off competition with intimidating campaign funds filled by special interests.

It would show badly needed political character if incumbent lawmakers put aside self-interest and stood up for competitive elections, engaged voters and true democracy in Hawaii.

Reach David Shapiro at volcanicash@gmail.com.