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## Redesigning Democracy in Hawaii

By Nikki Love | 01/18/2011

By Nikki Love

2010 was a sad year for our democracy. We saw a huge influx of outside money spent to influence local voters, negative campaign messages on the airwaves and in our mailboxes, elections funding slashed, polling places closed, and another year of sluggish voter turnout.

It's clear that the mechanisms of our democratic process are old and rusty, and desperately need an overhaul. As the 2011 state legislature convenes this month, let's explore ways to design a government that is more transparent, representative, and responsive. Here are four proposals for the legislature to promote a more democratic and accountable government.

**GIVE VOTING A BOOST.** Despite many high profile races, turnout of registered voters was a measly 43% in the primary election and 56% in the general election. When you include all eligible voters, these numbers drop further—in the general election, only 41% of eligible Hawaii voters cast a ballot. (Source: [http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout\\_2010G.html](http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout_2010G.html))

The issue of voter participation is not easy, but there is at least one proven method for bringing out the voters: same day voter registration. Currently voters in Hawaii must register 30 days in advance, but same day registration would allow eligible citizens to register and cast a ballot on election day. Nine states and the District of Columbia have successfully implemented this method, and states with same day registration have demonstrated significantly higher turnout than states without it. Specifically among young people (who are typically the least likely to vote), research shows that same day registration may boost turnout by as much as 14 points. (Source: [http://www.demos.org/pubs/voterswin\\_feb032010.pdf](http://www.demos.org/pubs/voterswin_feb032010.pdf))

It is simply archaic to require 30 day advance registration to be part of the democratic process. It's time we eliminate this barrier for citizens to exercise their civic duty and start getting serious about encouraging all eligible voters to participate.

**ENSURE A MAJORITY PICKS THE WINNER.** Oddly enough, the majority does not always rule in our elections. Our existing plurality system of voting (in which the candidate with the highest number of votes wins) breaks down when there are more than two candidates on the ballot. In several recent elections with many candidates on the ballot, we saw winners emerge with far less than 50% of the vote.

There is a better way to design an election system: instant runoff voting. With instant runoff voting, voters rank their preferences of candidates on the ballot (first choice, second choice, etc.). If one candidate receives more than 50% of the first-choice votes, then that candidate wins. But if nobody receives a majority of the first-choice votes, the instant runoff tabulations begin. The last place candidate is eliminated and those ballots are revisited, so that those voters' second-choice rankings are added to the totals. Eliminations and re-counting continues until a winner emerges with a true majority of the vote.

This system is used successfully in San Francisco, Oakland, Memphis, Minneapolis, St. Paul, Santa Fe, and North Carolina. Instant runoff voting lets voters accurately express their preferences, allows many candidates to run without fear of distorting the outcome, helps prevent the "spoiler" effect, and ensures that the winner is elected by a clear majority of the voters.

(For more info: <http://www.fairvote.org/instant-runoff-voting>)

**SHINE A LIGHT ON ALL CAMPAIGN MONEY.** In 2010, Hawaii voters were flooded with campaign advertising—and not just from the candidates themselves. In the aftermath of the U.S. Supreme Court decision in Citizens United v. FEC, outside groups spent huge sums on independent expenditures to advocate for or against candidates. This new area of campaign spending is expected to grow exponentially in 2012 and beyond.

Given the legal climate at this time, we cannot limit independent expenditures, but what we can do is require better transparency, so that at the very least the public knows where this money is coming from and whom it is supporting. Unfortunately, our existing reporting is weak—the National Institute on Money in State Politics (<http://www.followthemoney.org>) has ranked Hawaii among the bottom half of all states with regard to disclosure of independent expenditures.

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To improve transparency of independent expenditures, we need to improve the reporting requirements for noncandidate committees ("PACs") and electioneering communications. Both types of reports should include rigorous disclosure of who is providing funding and specify which candidate is being supported or opposed by a given expenditure. Furthermore, all of this information should be reported promptly throughout the campaign season and should be accessible online in a searchable database.

**MAKE THE CAPITOL MORE USER-FRIENDLY.** If you were hosting an important occasion for the public, would you pick a location with very limited parking and choose a time in the middle of the workday? Of course not. But that's how the legislature works. For those who have work, family, or school obligations, and especially those who live on the neighbor islands, it is extremely difficult to participate in the legislative process at the State Capitol.

The legislature has made great improvements over the decades with open meetings, the Public Access Room, a good website, and e-mail testimony. But much more can be done. For example, the legislature should broadcast more proceedings and archive all of them online so that citizens can see the deliberations, and legislative committees should give more advance notice for hearings to allow citizens time to submit meaningful testimony. Eighteen diverse citizen groups have endorsed these and other reforms to make the legislature more accessible and accountable. (Read the [letter](#) they sent.)

With these reforms for elections, campaign finance, and the legislative process, we can build a more open, representative, and responsive government. It is up to our elected officials to enact these policies, but it is up to all of us to become active, informed, and engaged citizens. Start now by joining us for two legislative workshops sponsored by Common Cause Hawaii and Kanu Hawaii (see details at <http://www.commoncause.org/HI/workshops>). Learn about the issues, contact your legislators, and help us make 2011 a great year for democracy in Hawaii.

*Nikki Love is the executive director of Common Cause Hawaii, a nonpartisan, grassroots organization dedicated to restoring the core values of American democracy, reinventing an open, honest and accountable government that serves the public interest, and empowering ordinary people to make their voices heard in the political process.*

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