



## Top News

# Senate passes bill for chief elections officer evaluations

Cathy Bussewitz

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The state's chief elections officer would have to undergo a performance evaluation after each general election under a plan approved by the state Senate.

The bill, SB 622, requires the Elections Commission to provide the written performance evaluation to the Legislature. It was introduced after problems during the 2014 elections that included 800 ballots that were missing in Maui and voters in storm-damaged parts of the Big Island who couldn't get to the polls.

The Senate approved the bill Thursday. It now goes to the House.

Democratic Sen. Russell Ruderman, who represents some of the Big Island voters, called the bill a "baby step when a giant step is needed."

"I think we have serious problems in the way the Election Commission does nothing in the face of election problems," Ruderman said. "I watched them do it before my eyes. I watched them do nothing in the face of a disaster in my community."

Many voters in Ruderman's district couldn't get to the polls on election day because of downed trees and power lines. But unlike residents of neighboring areas, they weren't given a second opportunity to vote. Ruderman had proposed a bill that would allow the elections commission to remove the chief elections officer by a majority vote, but that bill died in the Senate Judiciary Committee because of a lack of support.

Republican Sen. Sam Slom cast the lone vote against the evaluations bill Thursday, saying evaluations should be done by an independent panel outside of the commission.

"The current panel is poised to reward the chief elections officer for bad behavior," Slom said on the Senate floor before the vote. "They wanted to increase his salary before, and they're currently in negotiations to do that again. We need someone outside of that commission to actually review the work of the commission to make sure they're doing things as required by law."

Sen. Les Ihara, who introduced the bill, said after the vote that Slom is responsible for appointing members to that panel. He added that Slom and Republicans in the House have a disproportionate influence on the appointed commission's composition because the state's small Republican Party gets to appoint the same number of commissioners as the Democrats.

But the commission has limited authority over the chief elections officer because the commission was created by statute, and the elections officer is listed in the state constitution, Ihara said.

"We cannot have a statutory body attempting to control or influence a constitutional entity," Ihara said. "The next question is: Should we look at amending the constitution to establish a body that oversees elections?"

The Office of Elections had no comment, and it is primarily focused on future elections, said spokesman Rex Quidilla.

Senators also approved a plan to require candidates to file additional campaign-spending reports.