

Top News

State lawmakers pass same-day voter registration

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A candidate's political party and adherence to ideology can hold much sway for voters.

Hawaii lawmakers passed a bill Tuesday that will allow voters to register at polling places on the same day they vote.

The measure (HB 2590) aims to encourage voting in a state where turnout is often dismal. Once the nation's highest, Hawaii's voter turnout cratered at 44.5 percent, the nation's lowest, in the 2012 election, according to the U.S. Elections Project.

The House and Senate passed the bill that will allow voters to register at early voting sites beginning in 2016 or at their assigned polling places on Election Day starting in 2018.

"It's about making elections relevant to the modern world," Rep. Kaniela Ing, D-Kihei, Wailea, Makena, the bill's introducer, said in a statement. "Today's policy decisions will impact young people for decades to come, and it doesn't make sense to exclude them because of arbitrary registration deadlines based on technological limitations that no longer exist."

Hawaii Chief Elections Officer Scott Nago said in written testimony supporting the measure that any qualified person who wants to vote should be able to register and vote.

A measure approved in conference committee set \$100,000 toward costs. Honolulu City Clerk Bernice Mau estimates the law would cost Honolulu \$190,000 during each election cycle. She opposed it on the basis of cost.

The lone vote in opposition in the Senate came from that chamber's only Republican, Sam Slom, who represents Hawaii Kai. He decried Hawaii's last-in-the-nation voter turnout but said registration opportunities are already so abundant, one more won't encourage turnout. Rather, he said, lack of political choice depresses enthusiasm for the democratic process.

"In a lot of elections that we have, a lot of the races, there is only one candidate," Slom said on the Senate floor. "We find also that there is a prevailing sentiment among people that their vote is not going to count in this state. That's a wrong philosophy but it's a self-fulfilling prophecy if in fact they don't vote."

The House debate was prolific. Representatives pointed to past ballot shortages at polling places demonstrate that Hawaii elections stumble even when the number of potential voters is known. Measures to encourage turnout should thus be funded better, said Rep. James Tokioka, D-Wailua Homesteads. "I don't think this is enough bucks to make a bang," he said.

Other lawmakers argued that they had years to support the measure fully, and that the risk was worth it, to perhaps stir the most apathetic voters in the United States. "If you're a new voter, and you decide to vote, you can just do it," Rep. Chris Lee, D-Kailua, said in support. "We're the worst state for voter turnout, but we don't have to be."