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Hawaii News

Turnout sinks to record low

By [Dan Nakaso](#) and Gregg K. Kakesako ,

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CINDY ELLEN RUSSELL / CRUSSELL@STARADVERTISER.COM

Voters Matio Suliven, left, and Elsie Akiyama checked in with District 35, Precinct 3, chairman Avery Ganton at the Waipahu Intermediate School polling station Saturday. "I almost forgot to vote," said Akiyama, who realized it was the primary election as she passed by the polling station during her daily walk.

Hawaii set a record low for voter apathy in a primary election on Saturday, when only 34.7 percent of registered voters bothered to cast ballots. In all, 251,959 people voted.

The previous low for a Hawaii primary election was set in 2008, when 36.9 percent of registered voters cast ballots. Some 246,070 people voted in that primary.

"Hawaii is a low-turnout state, one of the lowest in the country," said political analyst Neal Milner. "Those sorts of things don't change very dramatically."

Saturday's primary election offered little excitement for voters, with the contest for Honolulu mayor serving as the marquee race that Milner and others considered more of a referendum on Honolulu's troubled rail project.

"There really weren't many compelling races at all," Milner said. By itself, he said, the mayor's race "didn't have the buzz to turn out a lot of people."

On Saturday, there were 16 uncontested races in the state Senate and House, and all but one of the unopposed candidates are Democrats.

Both political analyst Dan Boylan and Colin Moore, a University of Hawaii political science associate professor, contend that hard-core supporters and opponents of Honolulu's rail project likely voted in the mayor's race.

But the low turnout showed that voters had little other interest.

"This primary is all about rail," Moore said. "It's a referendum on rail, for sure."

In the 2008 primary election, only 246,070 voters cast ballots, and 95,042 voted by mail or in early walk-in balloting.

While Boylan expects the number of voters to jump in November's general election, Moore said he believes they'll be turned off by the presidential race between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.

Moore expects that November's voter turnout in Hawaii will be "extremely low. There are unfortunates for both (Clinton and Trump), and I think there's a lot of people who won't vote at all."

This year's presidential election is based on "fear," Moore said, and studies show that "fear makes voters stay home."

Boylan contends the number of Hawaii votes will jump "because the presidential election is huge."

Milner isn't sure what to expect in November.

"This election is going to be a little harder to read for turnout both here and generally," he said. "Both Clinton and Trump are historically the most disliked candidates that we've ever had for the presidency. That might make people back away."

No big problems

The state's 233 polling places from Hanalei, Kauai, to South Point on Hawaii island opened without any major problems, according to election spokeswoman Nedielyn Bueno. No major problems were reported throughout by the state Office of Elections.

Bueno said there was a problem with a paper ballot scanner just before the polls opened at 7 a.m. at Mauna-wili Elementary School. But a troubleshooter was dispatched, and a replacement machine was put into operation, she said.

Early voting

Saturday's election continued to show a preference by voters to cast mail-in ballots or vote early in person.

By the close of business Thursday, 19,215 of the state's 726,941 registered voters had voted through early walk-in and absentee voting.

On Oahu that meant that 9,928 of the 483,076 registered voters had voted before Saturday, according to the elections office, down from about 10,500 in 2014.

For the neighbor islands, state election officials reported that 4,838 of Hawaii island's 109,690 registered voters had already voted before the polls opened Saturday, along with 2,101 of Maui County's 91,139 registered voters and 2,348 of Kauai's 43,036 registered voters.

Among the two dozen voters at Manoa Elementary School on Saturday morning were attorney Robin Leong and medical technician Cory Yutaka, who had to wait about 15 minutes to vote.

Robyn Loudermilk, who was running the Manoa precinct voting operation for the first time, said she could have used another three to five precinct workers.

"We try our best," said Loudermilk, adding that there were about 10 people working at the Manoa precinct who are paid \$85 for a shift that could run more than 12 hours. "We have a couple of old-timers who really help the newcomers in coming up with the best way to keep the flow of voters going."

On Maui, County Clerk Danny Matteo's office was still trying to hire precinct workers Saturday.

"We have 500 now," Matteo said. "Fully manned, we should have 600. I think it is a problem statewide."

Keone Anderson, who moved to Manoa from Waikiki more than a year ago, ran into a small problem even after reporting an address change online: Her name was not listed on the poll books at the Manoa precinct. However, Anderson was issued a provisional ballot and allowed to vote.

Yutaka, who has been the first to vote at Manoa school during the past three elections, said, "It is very important to vote. There is a lot of power in voting."

Leong, 60, a lifelong Manoa resident, added, "I have voted here since I was 18."

Leong, however, uses only paper ballots.

"I don't trust electronic voting," Leong said. "I believe in paper ballots."

Star-Advertiser reporter Dominique Times contributed to this report.
