

Community Voice

Vote-By-Mail Could Boost Election Turnout

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1

By R. Elton Johnson III  / March 31, 2017

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If representative democracy works best when we participate in the evaluation and election of our representatives, then we have a serious problem in Hawaii.

Voter turnout in the Aloha State was dead last among the states in the most recent presidential elections, according to analysis of U.S. Elections Project data by [Nonprofit VOTE](#), only 43 percent of Hawaii's eligible voting population voted in the 2016 election. About 55 percent of registered voters cast a ballot.

Reasons for such low participation in Hawaii may include voters' unawareness of or disinterest in the issues, a relative lack of political competition, Native Hawaiian objection to participation in a U.S. election, complacency with the status quo— even schedule conflicts or transportation challenges.



A vote-by-mail box in Olympia, Washington

One approach to improving voter turnout in Hawaii is to make an effort to address voter cynicism and apathy. That can be done by providing resources and events to inform voters about the election process and how to participate in our democracy, about candidates' positions on the issues and who is funding their campaigns, and about what constitutes good government and how important it is.

Here, we'll focus on a second, complementary approach that's manifest in legislative efforts to increase voter turnout by simply making the process of both voting and voter registration more convenient and efficient.

Presumably one of the surest ways to increase voter participation would be to allow voting from now ubiquitous devices such as mobile phones, tablets, or laptops. But even though online voting has been implemented in U.S. municipal elections and in limited form by over 30 states, it is generally considered insufficiently secure or private for our national elections.

Meanwhile, the next best thing may be to expand vote by mail. Many studies find that universal vote by mail increases voter turnout—some were recently reviewed by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (Elections: Issues Related to Registering Voters and Administering Elections, June 2016).

Since more than 53 percent of those who voted in Hawaii's 2014 and 2016 elections did so via absentee ballot, with more votes cast before election day than on election day in 2016, we're already very familiar with the logistic efficiencies of voting by mail.

In a state where voting by mail has been permitted since 2003 for any federal, state, or county election held other than on the date of a regularly scheduled primary or general election (Hawaii Revised Statutes Sect. 11-91.5), expansion of voting by mail to all registered voters for all our elections would seem to be a natural further development.

[House Bill 1401](#) and [Senate Bill 334](#) establish vote by mail for all elections statewide, beginning with the 2020 primary election.

Some voter service centers would remain open on election day to receive hand-delivered ballots, facilitate same day registration and voting, accommodate voters with special needs, and provide other election services.

With voting by mail, security issues would be largely restricted to individual ballots, and could be minimized by signature checks. A voter could check to confirm receipt of his or her ballot, and a paper trail could be maintained in case of a recount.

Voter Registration Updates

In an age when nearly all of us communicate, make purchases, and bank online, it makes sense to update the processes associated with our elections. As traditional voter registration methods and deadlines have come

to seem increasingly dated and arbitrary given developments in technology, Hawaii has been making improvements.

In 2012 we adopted voter registration online, and [this was first implemented in 2016](#). In 2014 Hawaii adopted late voter registration (also known as same-day voter registration or Election Day registration), which will be fully implemented at precinct polling places in 2018.

Automatic voter registration, which would proactively associate eligible voters' registration with their application for or renewal of a driver's license or state identification card, would also help improve voter participation.

According to Nonprofit VOTE, automatic voter registration states have consistently realized voter turnouts an average of 7 percent to 13 percent higher than other states. Though implementation of automatic voter registration appears to have stalled at the Legislature again this year, resolutions proposing a task force to study it (SCR 108, HCR 116, HR 70) are progressing, and would benefit from community support.

In 2017, Common Cause Hawaii—a non-partisan grassroots organization committed to an open and accountable government that serves the public interest—is among those supporting both the vote-by-mail bill (HB 1401 HD1 and SB 334 SD2) and the automatic voter registration task force resolution (SCR 108 SD1, HCR 116 HD1, HR 70 HD1). Those measures appear to be among the most promising ways to help improve voter participation in Hawaii this year.

Community Voices aims to encourage broad discussion on many topics of community interest. It's kind of a cross between Letters to the Editor and op-eds. This is your space to talk about important issues or interesting people who are making a difference in our world. Columns generally run about 800 words (yes, they can be shorter or longer) and we need a photo of the author and a bio. We welcome video commentary and other multimedia formats. Send to news@civilbeat.com.

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