

Civil Beat Editorial

Vote-By-Mail: Make Hawaii's Abysmal Elections Cheaper And Better

The Legislature has the chance to increase turnout while streamlining the voting process and saving money.

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By Civil Beat Editorial Board  / March 29, 2017

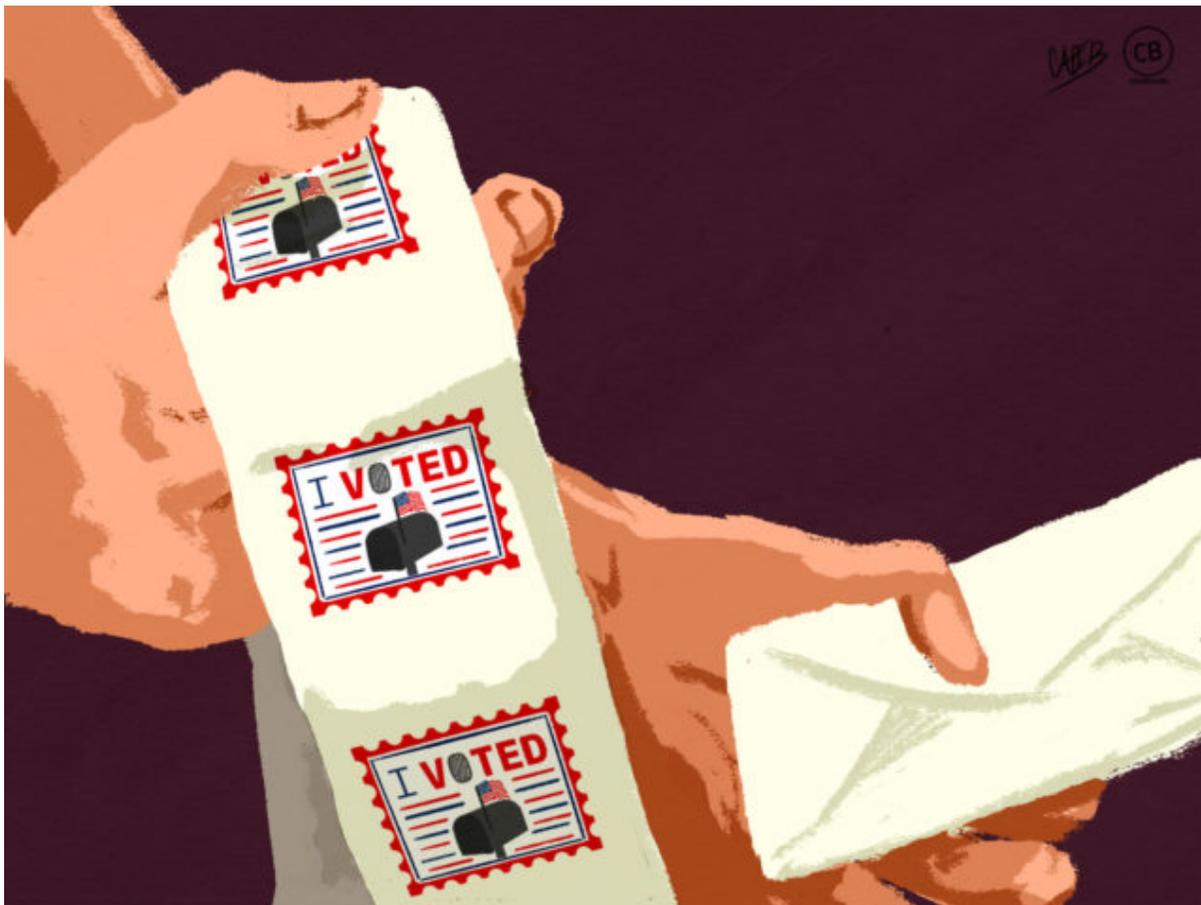
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What does Hawaii have in common with West Virginia, Texas, Tennessee and Arkansas?

Apparently, apathy about the democratic process.

A new report, "[America Goes to the Polls](#)" from the [Nonprofit VOTE](#) organization and the [United States Elections Project](#), shows — once again — how abysmal Hawaii's voter turnout is. For the fifth presidential election in a row, Hawaii came in dead last for voter participation, with only 43 percent of eligible voters turning out in 2016. (For perspective, national turnout for eligible voters reached 60 percent in 2016; the No. 1 state, Minnesota, had 75 percent turnout.)



Civil Beat has [long opined on this troublesome statistic](#), and lawmakers have taken baby steps to address some of the lowest hanging fruit, including allowing online voter registration in 2015 and paving the way for same-day voting registration in 2018. Now, with a new bill making its way through the Legislature to establish Hawaii as a vote-by-mail state, we're cautiously optimistic that this might be the last time we have to call on lawmakers to do something about it.

[House Bill 1401](#) has already cleared the House and is scheduled to be heard in the Senate Judiciary and Ways and Means committees on Thursday morning.

Under the bill, registered voters would be sent a ballot in the mail a few weeks before Election Day. They could either mail it back or drop it off in person the week of the election. A limited number of service centers would still be open Election Day, allowing for same-day registration and voting, and to serve voters with special needs.

Currently only three states — Oregon, Washington and Colorado — hold their elections entirely by mail, but those states also happen to be in the top 15 for voter turnout. One study found that vote-by-mail increased Washington's turnout in all types of elections by 2-4 percent. Most promising for Hawaii, which is not exactly a big player in presidential elections, vote-by-mail provides [a big bump for state and local elections](#).

“In the most recent mayoral elections in the 30 largest cities,” according to the “America Goes To The Polls” report, “two of the top three cities in voter turnout were Portland (1st) and Seattle (3rd).”

Vote-by-mail works because it meets voters where they already are (in their homes), reducing the physical and logistical burden of getting to a polling place. It also encourages a more educated electorate since voters have more time to research and understand their choices.

Anyone who has submitted an absentee ballot knows the convenience can't be beat. Apparently, that includes most Hawaii voters already.

“The legislature finds that an increasing number of Hawaii voters are submitting their votes by mail,” HB 1401 reads. “The 2014 Hawaii primary election was the first election in which more ballots were submitted before primary election day than on that day.”

The Legislature, it seems, is accepting one of the most difficult lessons in politics.

“The single hardest thing for a practicing politician to understand,” former British Prime Minister Tony Blair [wrote in his memoir](#), “is that most people, most of the time, don't give politics a first thought all day long. Or if they do, it is with a sigh ... before going back to worrying about the kids, the parents, the mortgage, the boss, their friends, their weight, their health, sex and rock 'n' roll. ... For most normal people, politics is a distant, occasionally irritating fog.”

Vote-by-mail makes politics — and really, our democracy — more tangible, more accessible and more personal.

But the best part is that it's a rare trifecta of public policy: it's the most convenient option for citizens; it encourages a more robust democratic process; and it saves money.

Because the state would no longer need to manage and fund polling centers, Hawaii stands to save \$800,000 to \$1 million per year. The voting process would be more streamlined, reducing the chance of error.

Hawaii currently has four voting options: early voting, no-excuse-needed absentee voting, permanent absentee status, and, of course, traditional in-person voting. But when you offer all these options, [you end up with the worst of all worlds](#), according to Phil Keisling, former Oregon secretary of state, who wrote:

By 1996, over half of all votes cast in (Oregon) elections were cast via absentee ballots — yet we had to print enough ballots to deal with every one of those voters deciding at the last minute to switch to the polls! And ensuring against double voting meant having to check every absentee ballot against the poll books. The result was more expensive elections, exasperated election officials, and voter confusion; we were essentially running “dual elections.” In terms of “risk” and possible loss of integrity, it was the worst situation to be in.

Sounds bad, but Keisling is wrong. Hawaii is actually in the worst situation. We're essentially running and paying for “dual elections,” and yet we still have the lowest voter turnout in the country.

If we want to get out the vote, we've got to mail it in.

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