

CIVIL BEAT EDITORIAL

Voting By Mail In Hawaii: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

Hawaii would move to a statewide vote-by-mail process by 2020 if lawmakers pass legislation that's still under consideration this session.

MARCH 23, 2015 • By The Civil Beat Editorial Board 

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[According to new rankings](#), Hawaii places No. 32 among all states in voter turnout, with a depressing 36.5 percent of citizens who are eligible to vote casting ballots in 2014.

While that is about the same as the national average and better than our state's performance in 2010, to put it mildly, there's plenty room for improvement. Vote-by-mail bills currently before the Legislature stand a chance of significantly boosting the number of people taking part in our democracy.

[House Bill 124](#) and [Senate Bill 287](#) would phase in voting by mail, introducing the practice first in counties with fewer than 100,000 residents in 2016 and extending it statewide by 2020. Ballots would be mailed directly to voters, who would then complete and return them by mail. No braving rush-hour traffic to get to a polling place, waiting in line or dealing with fussy optical scanners.

Brian Tseng/Civil Beat



These were among the 36.5 percent of registered voters who turned out in the 2014 general election in Hawaii.

The bills provide for a limited number of “voter service centers” to open on election days to assist voters with special needs and receive absentee and mail-in ballots in person. Election-day voter registration, passed last year by the Legislature, would remain intact under both bills – a good idea, even with voting by mail: States with election-day registration had about 12 percent high turnout than those that didn’t in 2014.

Both bills enjoy strong support and stand a good chance of passage by the Senate and House.

Legislators supporting these bills recognize that 2014 marked the first Hawaii election in which more early votes were cast than on Election Day. Of those early ballots, 83 percent were mailed in by absentee voters. Further adapting to this trend, as Oregon, Colorado and Washington state have already done through statewide vote-by-mail laws, “would significantly reduce the logistical issues related to conducting elections,”

says SB287.

That might eventually include phasing out Election Day as holiday for schools, state and county government offices and the University of Hawaii, which costs at least \$11.5 million, [according to a 2012 Civil Beat analysis](#).

The growing support for vote by mail and the new voter turnout report come at a time when elected officials and advocacy groups around the country are trying to boost participation in the electoral process, in no small part to offset the metastasizing influence of big money in U.S. elections.

Since the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in [Citizens United](#), which removed restrictions on corporate spending in elections, the glut of money that has flowed into federal and state elections has been staggering. The decision has enabled corporate interests to supplant those of actual voters in unprecedented ways. So long as the ruling stands, it will require new thinking to ensure the will of the people is represented and not simply that of the highest bidders.

Along those lines, President Barack Obama seemed to float a trial balloon with remarks last Wednesday in Cleveland in support of mandatory voting, quickly sparking a minor controversy. He talked about the potentially “transformative” effect of compulsory voting, which would likely bring more young, low-income and minority voters into the process and ostensibly counterbalance the influence of corporate money. He cited the benefit of mandatory voting laws in Australia and 25 other nations that [have some form of compulsory voting](#), according to the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

After a swell of predictable outrage at the idea of being told what to do by the government, the White House walked back the remarks a day later, saying the president “was not making a specific policy prescription for the United States.”

But an approach that has worked well for such countries as Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Costa Rica and others perhaps shouldn't be dismissed so easily, particularly in a nation that struggles to get the next generation of voters to the polls. In 2014, turnout of voters under 30 dropped to 26 percent – not exactly a number that brings the phrase “participatory democracy” to mind.

Compulsory voting may be an issue for another day, but Hawaii legislators should pass voting by mail now. If we are to enable more voters to take an active role in our democracy, we must be innovative and fairly evaluate all means at our disposal. While placing an envelope in a mailbox isn't exactly a new idea, it's a promising path toward greater civic participation.

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Kenneth Conklin · University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Hawaii voters are being herded like sheep to vote by mailed absentee ballots, and eventually to vote electronically through the internet. Holding elections that way would save a lot of money, produce immediate final results the moment the "polls" close, and be extremely convenient for voters. It might increase the dismal percentage of registered voters who actually vote.

But would abolishing election-day in-person voting be in the best interests of individual voters? Would it open the door to fraudulent vote-counting through electronic or procedural skulduggery at election headquarters ... [See More](#)

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Claire Piechota Santos

There's a train? Seriously, you bring up great points. What happened to the idea of making Election Day a paid holiday as long as you bring your receipt to your

making Election Day a paid holiday as long as you bring your receipt to your employer? Do you think people would show up at the polling booths before heading to the beach?

Like · Reply · Mar 23, 2015 10:39pm



David Rosen · Johnston college

Right now voting turnout is low but by voting in a booth we're at least assured of a secret ballot. If everybody votes at home, I'm afraid that a major portion of some candidates' ground game will be sending campaign volunteers into people's houses to "help" them fill out their ballots.

Like · Reply · 2 · Mar 23, 2015 9:29am



Jim Shon · Director at Hawai'i Educational Policy Center

Actually it does NOT cost us anything to close down schools. That figure is a mere calculation of how much it would cost if you paid people extra, or if you ran a factory that you had to close down.

Like · Reply · Mar 23, 2015 9:37am



Patricia Blair · University of Nebraska-Lincoln

I am not in favor of total vote by mail. Ken has covered the reasons. Voting is a responsibility instilled early.

Like · Reply · 1 · Mar 23, 2015 9:57am



Frank De Giacomo

People will get to choose between corporate candidate vs corporate candidate lite. The only thing that helps with Citizens United problems is voter owned elections. Until then billionaires and big corporations will be calling the shots while everyone else gets to fiddle at the fringes.

Like · Reply · Mar 23, 2015 11:41am



Lana Ah Lan DeSilva

Except the people are actively taking part in the constitutional republic by exercising their right to vote for none of the clowns.

This despite being bullied to vote for them. The people refuse to vote for the clowns. I commend them for it.

Like · Reply · Mar 23, 2015 12:24pm · Edited



Christie Savoy

I bet there's others who feel as I do; a level of patriotism and love for country on voting day. This may be worse than self serve gas stations with no attendants. Not a fan of only voting from home and erasing another American tradition.

Like · Reply · 3 · Mar 23, 2015 1:12pm



Ben Wagner

I think the current system should stay. There is just something about voting in person that makes things traditional and beloved to me.

Like · Reply · 1 · Mar 23, 2015 2:50pm



Todd Simmons · Opinion Editor at Civil Beat

Interesting comments all. How do you feel about a state like Oregon, for instance, where



interesting comments, all. How do you feel about a state like Oregon, for instance, where citizens have been voting by mail for more than 20 years, with little incidence of fraud and huge turnouts, election after election? I lived in Oregon for nine years before moving to Hawaii and can attest that theirs is a convenient system that has actually spurred greater, informed voter participation with virtually no incidence of fraud or compromised confidentiality. The Voters' Pamphlet that comes out prior to each election is a thoughtful and much-beloved civic engagement tool by Oregonians. My point: Oregon and other states have met many of the challenges that have been expressed here and offer examples that Hawaii might use to similar good effect. Thoughts?

Like · Reply · 1 · Mar 23, 2015 5:22pm



Frank De Giacomo

I don't like the idea of the government forcing everyone to check in and give their address or else receive criminal sanctions/ punitive fines. I think elections should be publically funded and the voters should be inspired to vote by the candidates. Part of the apathy now is that people's choices are restricted by a system that gives them corporate candidate vs corporate candidate light.

Like · Reply · Mar 23, 2015 5:54pm



Patricia Blair · University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Interesting..

Like · Reply · Mar 23, 2015 6:15pm



Claire Piechota Santos

Thanks, Todd - it's great to have the perspective and bona fide information from someone who's done the thing that's feared over here.

Like · Reply · Mar 23, 2015 10:42pm

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Claire Piechota Santos

Actually, my favorite way to vote is at the booth, which was a huge and prideful social event where I grew up. Sunday best! I'd love to see that happen again. But, people have been much less friendly the last couple of years, even snarky as if they were forced to be there, and the "polling marshals" once gave me a hard time for bringing my dog (even though then-governor Abercrombie brought his dog). Nowadays, I vote by mail. Admittedly, I've been known to leave my ballot in the "to do" mail pile until the last minute - but I remembered just in time. I'd ultimately like voting to be online - but I know that in this town the system would crash in 5 minutes, so snail mail will have to do. It helps keep USPS in business. That's a plus.

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