

COMMUNITY VOICE

Why I'm Not Willing To Accept Low Voter Turnout

Declining rates of participation in our democratic processes shouldn't be taken lightly by anyone. We can change.

ABOUT 7 HOURS AGO · By Alex Santiago 

Share 0

I disagree with Neal Milner's recent take on participation in our state's democracy ("[Let's Stop Worrying About Hawaii's Low Voter Turnout](#)"). Milner criticizes those of us who are trying to increase voter turnout as advocates who worship a false idol. He characterizes the use of the term "No Vote, No Grumble" as "the ultimate derision," claiming we are wishful thinkers, out of touch with reality.

To the contrary, the record shows that many of us who are working in the trenches trying to get people to participate in the democratic process are well informed and aware of the challenges we face in trying to get our communities to believe in the process enough to take part. I am very proud of the committed staff and dedicated volunteers who, in spite of the defeatist attitude of some, continue to believe that an informed, engaged community can, in fact, make a positive difference for Hawaii.

The No Vote, No Grumble campaign has been working over the years to encourage communities to become engaged in civic activities, with voting being only one of those activities. Although we have taken some grief for our title, it is usually quickly brushed aside when we point out that it is a local term used to get a point across, though certainly not to be taken literally.



Voters wait for the chance to cast their ballots at the Manoa Elementary School polling place in November 2014.

We know that people will not stop grumbling just because of a name or title. What we try to do is encourage people to become informed and to get engaged. We try to explain how the legislative system works and why people should care and pay attention. We have found that people do care deeply about what is going on and, when given an opportunity, will participate.

Many people I have talked to tell me that they are not voting not because they are too busy, don't care, or are uninformed, but because they have simply lost faith in our system of government. They no longer believe that voting makes a difference, and many have stated there are no candidates they feel compelled to vote for.

If this does not concern you, then I don't know what will.

We continue to see fewer and fewer people voting and participating in the legislative process. If there continues to be a withdrawal of our citizens from participation in the only system we

have, then what does the future hold for all of us? Lobbyist and special interest groups continue to exert more and more influence over elected officials, and our communities continue to wonder just when things will change for the better.

If there continues to be a withdrawal of our citizens from participation in the only system we have, then what does the future hold for all of us?

Near the end of his article, Milner points out that an “unresponsive government is the problem” and that “citizen involvement is the key weapon to changing this.” On these points we agree. That is why we, and many other civic engagement programs, do what we do.

We are not fooling ourselves or anyone else into thinking that simply getting people to turn out to vote will improve things. Our hope is that by educating our communities about how they can get involved, how they can hold public officials accountable and how they can do those things consistently, we may see some positive changes.

We are not casting judgment on others for not voting, as Milner indicated. We are, however, trying our best to use the civic engagement process to try to provide an avenue for public involvement. We are hopeful that will lead to better policies for all of us.

Certainly things are not going well right now, and most would agree that things could be better. At the end of the day, what concerns me the most about commentary like Milner's is the idea that low voter turnout is nothing to be concerned about. This way of thinking could lead us to believe that this is the way it is, this is the way it has always been, and this is how it always will be.

Now in my mind, that is really dangerous.

Follow Civil Beat on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). You can also sign up for Civil Beat's free [daily newsletter](#).

About the Author

Alex Santiago

Alex Santiago is a licensed social worker and a former state legislator who served also served as chair of the state Democratic Party. He has worked as an advocate and lobbyist for social service



agencies and professional organizations. Alex has taught social policy at the University of Hawaii School of Social Work and is presently the program director of No Vote, No Grumble.

Use the RSS feed to subscribe to Alex Santiago's posts today

Honolulu Civil Beat uses Civil Comments to encourage robust community discussion of articles and issues. Learn more in the [Civil Comments user guide](#). Or simply get started by creating an account and logging in. You can flag a comment for review by clicking the flag. *(Note: Comments before May 18, 2016 will remain on our previous Facebook commenting system.)*

COMMENTS (2)

LOG IN

Post your comment...

SUBMIT

Sort comments by **Highest Rated**

@ slu
1 hour ago

Right on Alex. Milner's position leads us to an oligarchial government run by the in-crowd who have no reason to respond to the public. For all intents and purposes, that is what we have today with only occasional aberrations where those who do vote get fed up. Still, those aberrations are a reminder to the in-crowd that they can't go too far. The sad fact is that once elected, unless a politician gets crazy, they have a job for life and may well die in office. As long as they fly their corruption under the radar, they will likely get re-elected again and again, ad-nauseum.

@ Thomas Dye
3 minutes ago

Low voter turnout is a worrying symptom of the weakening bond between citizens and their elected representatives. I agree with Santiago that No Vote, No Grumble's work with citizens is a step in the right direction. We should work, as well, on the other side of the bond by convincing elected representatives that ties to constituents need to be strengthened.

A first step in that direction should be to outlaw contributions to a candidate or office-holder from a person not represented by that office.

This step is especially important today, when the distribution of wealth and income is so heavily skewed to the rich. In this situation, candidates and office holders find it difficult to raise campaign funds from their financially strapped constituents and increasingly turn to sources of money outside their districts.

[PRIVACY](#) [TERMS](#)

SUPPORT NONPROFIT, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM TODAY!

I would like to donate

One-Time Monthly Yearly

DONATE NOW

If your organization would like to make a donation, please contact us at business@civilbeat.org.



Enter your email to receive Civil Beat's free daily newsletter.

SUBMIT
