DONATE ▶ Help Us Raise $50K **$75K** by Dec. 31! $0$10K $20K$30K$40K$50K$75K

COMMUNITY VOICE

The Case For Automatic Voter Registration In Hawaii

The Legislature should make voter registration automatic when you apply for or renew a driver's license or state ID.

ABOUT 17 HOURS AGO · By Garrett Thompson 🔊   Share 11   Share   1

With Hawaii's voter turnout in the 2016 election at only 55 percent (down from 66 percent in 2012) of registered voters, it's time to look at new ways to add voters to the voter rolls.

Democracy works better when more people participate, and with such dismal participation rates, a law that puts the onus on the citizenry to decline to participate further may be called for. Online voter registration is now available, and same-day registration will be an option in 2018.

But one action the Legislature can take in its next session is to allow automatic voter registration when you apply for or renew a driver's license or state ID.

Cory Lum/Civil Beat

Voters fill out their ballots at Kahaluu Elementary School in November. With automatic voter registration, more ballots would be cast.

Currently when eligible citizens apply for or renew their driver's license or state ID, they have to fill out a voter affidavit in addition to the standard application form in order to be registered to vote. Automatic voter registration reverses this. Instead of having to opt into the registration program, all eligible citizens are registered to vote by default, except for those who choose not to be.

Additionally, voter registration information would be electronically transferred from the licensing agency to the county clerk for processing, eliminating the need for the physical transfer of paper forms and manual data entry.

The concept of automatic voter registation has been debated in Hawaii, most recently with two bills in the 2016 legislative session: HB 1652 and HB 401.

HB 1652 made it through several committee hearings with support from the Office of Elections and the League of Women Voters. Common Cause Hawaii supported the bill, and has called

automatic voter registration an important part of "a system that will make it significantly easier to register to vote."

Unfortunately HB 1652 was stalled in the Senate. HB 401 failed to survive conference committee after making it past the House and Senate.

The concerns of those opposed to the bills seem to mainly lie in the cost and in the security of our elections. While cost is a legitimate concern, especially in Hawaii where the budget is very tight, every single state that has modernized its voter system has not just saved money, but saved a lot of money.

According to the Brennan Center for Justice, a national nonpartisan law and policy institute, Washington spent $280,000 to modernize its voting system. While this might seem like a large investment, it rapidly paid for itself. In the first year alone, the Secretary of State's Office saved $125,000, with individual counties saving even more. The costs are more than outweighed by the money saved and these modernizations would more than pay for themselves in a few elections.

While Washington has taken further steps to modernize its voting system, automatic voter registration is an essential first step. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, you can't have a modernized voting system in place without first implementing it, calling it "the centerpiece of a modern voter registration system."

Other jurisdictions have also taken further steps to modernize their voting system (California, Oregon and the District of Columbia), but all of them had to take the first step with automatic voter registration.

The choice to be able to opt out can alleviate the privacy/security concerns, especially in a moment in our history when we collectively share our private data without thinking every time we click "Agree" on a user agreement for a new app. There is also no evidence to suggest that modernized voting systems are more susceptible to vote fraud, if anything the opposite is true.

The Brennan Center for Justice notes two main reasons modernized systems are more accurate: First, less paper means less room for human error, filling out fewer forms means there is less of a change of paperwork being misfiled/lost or someone's handwriting being

misread. Second, this increased accuracy and ease of filing leads to fewer outdated or duplicate records. These lead to increased accuracy in elections.

Hawaii needs an engaged electorate today and in the future. Make voting registration easier, so that we have a greater turnout. A democracy cannot be healthy if less than half of the eligible citizens vote. Politics are becoming far more polarized and important, even on state or county matters, such as rail, wind, GMOs and the telescope.

While it is easy to feel apathetic about the national elections, local elections are still extremely important and will affect the day-to-day lives of everyone in the state. If voter turnout remains how it is, we will be letting 55 percent of the people make decisions that affect 100 percent of people here. Shouldn't the other 42 percent voice their opinion?

Automatic voter registration benefits everyone, not just the voters but elected officials as well. Having more of their constituents able to voice their opinion enables elected officials to be more tuned in to the needs and wants of their communities so they can connect with them and do more to help.

As Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence, a government's legitimacy comes from the "consent of the governed." Can there really be consent of the governed when more than 42 percent of registered voters aren't voting? The governed consenting is dependent on the governed actually voicing their opinion.

Voting and not voting are almost self-fulfilling prophecies, by making it easier and more convenient to vote we can help as many people as possible make voting a life-long habit. While this might not seem necessary in a mostly single-party state like Hawaii, we still need people to voice their opinions. Even in a sea of blue there are different shades and gradations, and we need to welcome all of them as a part of our democratic process.

Automatic voter registration is a common sense, nonpartisan opportunity to not only increase participation in elections but also integrity. The Brennan Center wrote, "It satisfies the concerns of liberals by enfranchising more people and those of conservatives by boosting election security. And everyone can agree on the benefits of saving money and reducing error."

Before the 2017 legislative session begins, urge your state legislators to support automatic voter registration.

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.

About the Author

Garrett Thompson ⟑

Garrett Thompson is a 29-year-old surfer from California. He is a Political Science major at the University of Hawaii with a passion for Constitutional Law and Civil Liberties.

Use the RSS feed to subscribe to Garrett Thompson's posts today

💬   Show Comments

SUPPORT NONPROFIT, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM TODAY!

I would like to donate $ 10

○ One-Time   ◉ Monthly   ○ Yearly

DONATE NOW

🔒 Secured by **stripe**

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

Prefer to mail a check? Our mailing address is 3465 Waialae Avenue, Suite 200, Honolulu, HI 96816.