

## NCSL-Democracy Fund Project Elections 2020: Policy, Funding and the Future Hawaii

A team of Hawaiian legislators, legislative staff, and state and local election officials convened in Honolulu on June 2, to discuss elections-related technology. Topics included the process for verifying signatures on absentee ballots, counting absentee ballots, a possible model for adopting all vote-by-mail and potential future next steps for Hawaii as it considers its election model.

### A Profile of Elections in Hawaii

- Turnout: 44 percent in the November 2012 General Election.<sup>1</sup> The national average was 58 percent.
- Registered voters: 706,890.<sup>2</sup>
- Election administration units: four counties.
- Equipment: The same equipment is used statewide, through Hart InterCivic, and the state just renewed a lease for the voting machines that goes through 2020.
- Overall rank on The Pew Charitable Trusts' 2012 [Elections Performance Index](#): 42.

### Presentation from the City and County of Honolulu

Honolulu City Clerk Glen Takahashi and Election Administrator Chadd Kadota presented on the current method of voting in Hawaii, and demonstrated their high-speed ballot sorting machine.

- In Hawaii, the city and county clerks administer absentee voting (either for ballots that arrive via mail or are voted at walk-in locations) and voter registration. The state office of elections administers Election Day voting at polling places, counting and results distribution, the management of the voting system and online voter registration. A new state-administered voter registration system will be deployed in 2017, shifting some of the responsibilities for voter registration from the counties to the state.
- There are uniform policies, procedures, deadlines and systems used in every county throughout the state.
- Since Hawaii launched its online voter registration system in August 2015 nearly one third of transactions (new registrations and address updates) have come through it.
- Fifty percent of voters in the state are choosing to vote absentee, either through the mail or via walk-in locations.
- In Honolulu 23 percent of voters are on the permanent absentee list and that number is growing daily. Eighty percent of absentee voters return a voted ballot.
- Signature verification occurs at the county level. Honolulu has a ballot sorting machine that sorts out envelopes that are missing a bar code or signature. If there is enough time before the election, envelopes with missing signatures are sent back to the voter to sign and resend. Then the machine takes a digital image of the signature on the envelope, which can be compared on a monitor with the voter's signature on file. If there is a blatant signature discrepancy, the ballot is not counted. This occurs with about 0.25 percent of absentee envelopes.
- The county paid \$211,000 to buy the machine, and spends \$20,000 per year to maintain it. Software exists that can automate the signature verification process, but is not currently being used in Hawaii. Honolulu is the only county with this machine; in other counties signatures are verified manually.

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<sup>1</sup> Percentage of voting eligible population, courtesy of The Pew Charitable Trusts' [Elections Performance Index](#)

<sup>2</sup> 2014 [registered voter statistics](#), State of Hawaii Office of Elections

## Presentation from the State Elections Office

State Election Director Scott Nago presented on the state's role in conducting Election Day polling place voting, and in aggregating and distributing election results.

- The state uses the same type of equipment statewide. In polling places, paper ballots are marked and voters insert them into a precinct optical scanner, which allows for the opportunity to correct mismarks. Ballot marking devices are also available at polling places for voters with disabilities, in accordance with federal law.
- The state recruits and trains poll workers for the City and County of Honolulu. Other counties are responsible for poll worker recruitment, and the state provides assistance for training.
- Counties verify signatures on absentee ballots and send valid ballots to the state to be counted. The state operates four counting centers, one on each island.
- Although signature verification may take place beforehand, absentee envelopes are not opened and scanned until Election Day.
- Beginning to process ballots before Election Day would speed up the counting process and reduce the manpower needed. (In Colorado, processing of mail ballots can begin eight days ahead of the election and results are put on thumb drives (though not distributed). This allow the first report 15 minutes after the 7p.m. poll closing, to contain 75 to 80 percent of the unofficial results.)
- Results are transmitted to the state via point-to-point modem.
- An audit process is conducted on election night to reconcile results with the number of voters that checked in, to make sure nothing is missed.
- When full Election Day registration is implemented in 2018, polling places would call in to a central command center if someone wants to register and vote at the same time. E-poll books with access to the statewide voter registration database could help facilitate this process.

## Presentation on the "Colorado Model"

Colorado Election Director Judd Choate presented on his state's new election model, enacted in 2013. [HB1303](#) established an all-mail system with vote centers, same day registration, and provisions to maintain a cleaner voter registration list. The model led to significantly fewer provisional ballots issued in the state. All of these reforms combined made elections in Colorado less expensive.

- The percentage of voters using mail ballots had steadily increased prior to the 2013 change, and had reached above 70 percent.
- All voters in Colorado receive a mail ballot, but most return their voted ballots by dropping them off at a vote center, a drive-up ballot box return station or a 24-hour drop box that is under video surveillance.
- The bill required counties to complete a National Change of Address (NCOA) check each month to identify voters that have moved. Colorado also participates in the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC) to exchange voter registration records with other states to identify voters who have moved, and identify potential eligible voters who are not yet registered.
- The bill included a provision for same-day registration, which also helps keep the voter list clean. If a voter doesn't update his or her address before the election, there is still an opportunity to do so up to and including Election Day.
- Voters registering in the 28 days before the election do not favor any one political party, but do tend to be younger.
- Studies have shown that all-mail ballot elections increase turnout in low interest elections. Colorado has seen a 1.7 percent increase in turnout between 2010 and 2014 (comparable elections before and after implementing all-mail ballot elections).
- In terms of more efficiently administering elections, cleaning up the voter list was the most important factor. The second most important factor was permitting same-day election registration. These two things together allowed for a significant reduction in provisional ballots issued, which slow down the voting process and are time consuming and therefore costly to administer.

## Takeaways/Considerations for the Future of Elections in Hawaii

- When asked what the key values for elections in Hawaii are, accuracy was the most important element mentioned.
- The process for dealing with signature discrepancies on mailed ballots was of concern, and may lead to legislative action.
- In most states the date of the canvass, i.e. the process by which votes are compiled and reviewed at the state level in order to certify official results, is one to four weeks after the election. Hawaii's canvass is conducted on election night, allowing very little time for voters to potentially come in and fix a signature discrepancy.
- If the state chooses to go to an all-mail model, what will that choice mean for equipment after 2020?
- It is important to track current costs to be able to quantify the impact that any change to election law might have on the cost of elections.
- If the state can begin to process ballots prior to Election Day, even if this does not include counting them, it could speed up the reporting of results.
- Once more than 50 percent of voters are choosing to vote by mail, it makes the case that maybe all voters should receive a mail ballot.
- Since voting by mail is increasingly popular in Hawaii, does it make sense to look at the provision that allows precincts with 500 voters or fewer to vote by mail? Should this limit be increased?
- If Hawaii does move to all-mail, does it want a model like Colorado's where a certain number of vote centers are available in a county, or more like Washington and Oregon where the only vote center provided is the county seat?
- Maintaining an accurate voter list and keeping addresses up-to-date becomes increasingly important as more voters choose to vote absentee. Hawaii could consider joining an interstate crosscheck program such as the [Electronic Registration Information Center \(ERIC\)](#).
- Legislators can ask questions of local election officials and see what they need to make the process more efficient, and request to see the process any time.

## Resources

- [Contact NCSL](#) if you would like to see the presentations from this meeting.
- NCSL's [All-Mail Elections](#)
- NCSL's [Election Technology Overview](#)
- NCSL's [Elections Technology Toolkit: Voting Machines and Beyond](#)
- NCSL's [Elections 2020: Policy, Funding and the Future](#)
- NCSL's [Funding Elections Technology](#)
- NCSL's [Voter List Accuracy](#)
- NCSL's Webinar on [Spring Cleaning Your Voter Lists: The Legislative Role](#)
- Articles from NCSL's election administration newsletter The Canvass:
  - [All-Mail Elections Quietly Flourish](#)
  - [Election Funding for 2020 and Beyond](#)
  - [Elections Technology: Nine Things Legislators May Want to Know](#)
  - [Burning Questions at NCSL's Policy and Elections Technology Conference](#)
  - [Internet Voting - Not Ready for Prime Time?](#)
  - [Internet Voting: Creeping Our Way?](#)
  - [All About E-Poll Books](#)
  - [Voting Technology: Current and Future Choices](#)
  - [Voting Technology Standards: What Legislators Need to Know](#)
- The Pew Charitable Trusts' report on [Colorado Voting Reforms: Early Results](#)
- NCSL offers technical assistance, testimony and other in-person help as needed, and can provide research on any topics useful to Hawaii policymakers.

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