Your Vote Counts!

Next Saturday, September 23, is Primary Election Day in Hawaii. I cannot think of a time when there has been a more important election in the 50th State, and it is vitally important that every eligible member of our Hawaii ‘ohana participate.

In the Democratic primary, there are two hotly contested races for Congress. U.S. Representative Ed Case, 53, is running against incumbent Daniel Akaka, 82, for one of Hawaii’s two seats in the U.S. Senate. In addition, there are ten Democratic Party candidates vying for the seat in the U.S. House that is being vacated by Representative Case.

As Hawaii has traditionally, but not always, sent members of the Democratic Party to Congress, the winner of the Democratic primary is likely to prevail in the November 7 general election. In Washington, D.C., our senators and representatives will help define critical issues facing our nation, including the war against Islamo-fascist terrorism, immigration policy, energy policy, tax rates, our nation’s massive entitlement programs, and unfunded federal mandates.

There are also vital state and county elections for governor, the entire state House of Representatives (51 seats), 13 seats in the state Senate, the Board of Education, two mayors, and several county council seats in Honolulu and on the neighbor islands.

Sadly, if the trend of the past three decades continues, the result in each of these elections will be determined by the minority of eligible citizens who vote. Many people don’t even bother to register to vote. Of those who are registered, only about 40 percent actually cast ballots in a primary election. That is the worst record in all 50 states of our nation.

While the following example uses imprecise numbers, the principle is sound and it illustrates how a tiny group of voters can actually determine who is elected to office in Hawaii.

Say you were in a room with 100 voting-age Hawaii citizens and you begin by asking everyone to stand.

• Since roughly a third of our citizens do not even bother to register, you then ask every third person in the room to sit down, leaving 67 standing, representing the registered voters.

• Since 60 percent of those registered nonetheless failed to vote in Hawaii’s last primary election, you ask 60 percent of those still standing—40 people—to sit down, leaving just 27 potential voters standing.

• Since important races are often won by someone who gets only slightly over 50 percent of the vote, you ask just under half of those still standing, 13, to sit down. They represent those who voted for the losing candidate.

• The remaining 14 people standing represent those who elected the winning candidate.

Looked at another way, this means that just one out of every seven eligible voters picks the winners in our elections! Of course, the winner will soon be making decisions that affect every one of the 100 potential voters in the room plus perhaps another 30 or 40 people who live in the state but are ineligible to vote because they are under age 18, are not U.S. citizens, or are not eligible for other reasons.

The situation will be even more extreme in the race for Ed Case’s seat in the U.S. House. With 10 candidates running on the Democratic ticket, if the vote is split more or less evenly among them, the winner of the Democratic primary could be the person who gets just 11 percent of the vote. That would be a total of only three votes in the theoretical illustration above. More likely, the winning candidate will get 20 or 30 percent of the vote but that still translates to only five to eight votes in our hypothetical case above.

Special interest groups understand this math very well and know that by marshalling a relatively small group of committed, like-minded voters, they can get people elected who are sympathetic to their cause. Once elected, legislators, who can also do the math, will vote for the issues important to the special interest groups who helped get them elected so they can be re-elected the next time.

The only way around having special interest groups control elections is to have a large voter turnout. Unfortunately, in recent years, the people of Hawaii have not embraced that notion. Since 1978, when a record high of 74.6 percent of those registered actually voted, Election Day turnout has steadily slipped to the record low of 39.7 percent in the 2004 primaries.

Outrigger and OHANA hotels used to offer prizes in a lottery to members of our ‘ohana who voted. However, we recently had to discontinue that practice because the state government ruled that programs such as that, designed to encourage voter participation, were illegal.

There are some who do not want a larger voter turnout in Hawaii’s elections. Honolulu Star-Bulletin columnist Richard Borreca recently quoted an unidentified Hawaii legislator as saying, “Politicians don’t want to encourage any more voting because the power groups that put them into office would be diluted if more voters showed up at the polls. Certain entities —
parties and unions — really work their memberships to vote their way, and that has been fairly effective. So they exert a heavier influence over the independent voter who is not reminded to vote.” I wish this were not true.

The right to vote in a free election is precious. I know people — including many members of our 'ohana — who come from countries where people are denied this right and live in repressive conditions. Over the years, hundreds of thousands of men and women of our armed forces have given their lives to preserve this right. That battle continues today as we fight in Afghanistan and Iraq to prevent totalitarians from regaining power and denying citizens the freedoms Americans take for granted—sometimes so much so that we don’t exercise our rights!

Next week, I hope you exercise your right to vote in Hawaii. Go to the polls in your precinct on Saturday. If you cannot do that, there are several places throughout the Islands where you can do walk-in voting throughout this next week, Monday through Saturday.

Your vote counts. You can make a difference, and to borrow the motto for the Hawaiian Vote 2006 campaign, “No vote. No grumble!”