As you read this article, Election Day 2010 in the United States is just over a week away. Actually, polling has already started, with more people than ever taking advantage of absentee ballots and the early walk-in voting options available almost everywhere. Still, candidates at all levels are making a furious, final drive to deliver their message and collect votes. The political mud is flying fast in all directions.

I hope that every eligible member of the Outrigger 'ohana will vote in this important election. It is a hard-won right that Americans are privileged to enjoy. Around the world, not everyone is so fortunate. We can preserve our freedoms and way of life only as long as we make the effort to keep informed about the candidates and the issues, and take the time to choose those who will best make and carry out our laws.

It is important to understand that your vote will count. For the members of our 'ohana who live in Hawaii, this may be hard to believe. There, the Democratic Party has controlled the state Legislature for more than half a century – since 1954! – and usually wins elections by a wide margin.

This year, national frustration over the results of four years of Democratic control of Congress and two years of the Obama presidency have given Republicans a shot at taking control of the U.S. House of Representatives and possibly the U.S. Senate.

In Hawaii, Neil Abercrombie, a 72-year-old, former 20-year Democratic congressman, is in the political fight of his life against Republican Lt. Governor Duke Aiona to be elected the state’s next governor. Democrat Colleen Hanabusa is also in a tight race against Republican Charles Djou for the seat in the U.S. House of Representatives that Abercrombie vacated to run for governor.

According to all the polls I've seen, the margin of victory in both races will be slim – perhaps just a few votes. Will the final tally include your vote?

Members of our 'ohana who vote in Colorado, where our reservations center is located, have an equally vital mission. The statewide U.S. Senate race, which pits incumbent Democrat Michael Bennet against Republican challenger Ken Buck, is as tight as it can be. The margin of victory will likely be slim and the outcome could determine which party controls the Senate. Yes, the ballots from our Denver reservations staff might decide which party leads “the world’s greatest deliberative body” for the next two years and perhaps beyond.

In both Hawaii and Colorado, and elsewhere around the country, one vote might also make an important difference in many local races where the total number of votes is much smaller, and each vote thus carries even more potential weight.

That happened in 1978 in South Dakota, a state with a population of less than 700,000 at the time. Tom Daschle was elected to the U.S. House by a margin of only 14 votes. A recount later bumped up the margin of victory to 139 votes, but it still means that if only 70 people had voted the other way, Daschle might never have started on his political career, which was capped by his election as Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate in 2001.

There are all sorts of stories in the press and on the Internet about how just one vote has often made a difference. Some of them are true, but many are distortions or legends. If you are interested in the details, go to www.snopes.com and enter “one vote” in the search box to find out what really happened.

Even national elections can be amazingly close. Recall that eight years ago, the margin of victory in the
Voting is a Privilege and Responsibility

Continued from page 1

presidential race in five states was less than one percent. George W. Bush won Florida by only 537 votes, and Al Gore won New Mexico by only 366 votes. In 2004, the margin of victory in the U.S. presidential race in three states was again less than one percent.

Max Sword, our legislative liaison, relates a true one-vote story about a well-known Hawaii political figure. In 1988, Romy Cachola was running for the State House. On primary election day, Romy's brother came by the family's Kalihi home to take Romy's father to Foster Village to do some sign waving. Romy asked his brother to first take their father to vote. “No need,” replied his brother, and they headed to Foster Village. Later on, Romy's uncle came by and found out that Romy's dad had not voted. He jumped into his car, drove to Foster Village, picked up the dad, and took him back to the polls in Kalihi where he voted for his son. When the votes were counted, Romy and his opponent, Connie Young, each received the same number of votes, 1,795, and both went on to the general election, which Romy won by 77 votes. Had his dad not voted, Romy would have lost the primary election and, perhaps, never had the political career that brought him many years in the State House and now, on the Honolulu City Council.

As the nation remains focused on the November 2 elections, we should also remember that wide-open political campaigns and the secret ballot are very special privileges not universally enjoyed around the world. Try promoting something like that today in Cuba, China, or Saudi Arabia, for instance, and you will quickly find yourself behind bars or worse!

In Russia, balloting is nominally secret, but opposition candidates are harassed, manhandled, and sometimes arrested, and the Putin-Medvedev regime has asserted control over all television stations and intimidated enough of the rest of the media – through tactics that include the “unsolved” murders of more than a dozen critical journalists – that the Russian media has been largely reduced to the role of regime cheerleaders.

It’s still not as bad as in the old USSR, when for seven decades the government owned, operated, and rigorously censored every newspaper and broadcast outlet in the country, but it is a terrible disappointment for those who had hoped for something better following the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

Just last month, citizens who wanted to vote in Afghanistan's parliamentary elections found it quite hazardous, even deadly. As reported by Cynthia Oi in the Honolulu Star-Advertiser, voters who went to the polls there faced “the possibility of dying by grenade, rocket attack, gunfire or beating, ... Low turnout was also influenced by the prospect of fraud. Fake registration cards, ballot stuffing, vote buying and other ‘irregularities,’ as monitoring organizations bureaucratically describe them, are unremarkable in Afghan elections. ... A Kaneohe [Hawaii]-based Marine, First Lt. Scott J. Fleming from Marietta, Ga., was in Helmand province when he was struck in the neck by small-arms fire and killed. He and his unit were providing security for the elections.”

Clearly, freedom and democracy come at a price, and as we pull a lever or mark a ballot between now and November 2, we should take a moment to honor those who have, in the past and even today, given their time and sometimes their lives to protect our right to select our leaders in free elections in the U.S.A.

Yes, your vote can make a difference. Make it count!