Voting is a Privilege and Responsibility

As I write this article, Election Day 2008 in the United States is less than a week away. Polling has actually 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 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 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 has been much energy spent on the presidential race between Hawaii-raised Barack Obama and John McCain, and it is all but certain that Obama will have a wide margin of victory, as our state’s favorite son. Hawaii’s two congressional seats also seem secure in the hands of the well-known incumbents, Neil Abercrombie and Mazie Hirono.

So some might say, “It’s inconvenient; it takes time. Why bother to vote?”

There are many reasons.

In Hawaii, the races for seats in the Legislature and at the County level – including Mayoral contests on Oahu, Kauai, and the Big Island – are much less defined. Also, there are two very important ballot questions to be decided. These are: 1) whether or not to hold a Constitutional Convention (“Con-Con”) and 2) whether or not to proceed with the development of a heavy-rail transportation system in Honolulu. Both desperately need serious voter consideration and turnout on November 4. The results of those two contests will define the future of Hawaii for decades to come.

Members of our ‘ohana who vote in Colorado, where our reservations center is located, have an equally vital mission. Colorado, with nine votes in the Electoral College, is one of the “swing states” needed by both Obama and McCain to win the presidential race. Both candidates have visited the state repeatedly in the past few months. Whoever comes out on top, the margin of victory in Colorado, traditionally Republican, may be slim. The ballots from our Denver reservations staff might make a difference in who leads our nation for the next four years.

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

There are all sorts of stories in the press and on the Internet about how 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.

However, even national elections can be amazingly close. Recall that eight years ago, the margin of victory in the 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.

Four years ago, 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 Tuesday’s 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.

In Russia, balloting is nominally secret, but opposition candidates are harassed, manhandled and sometimes arrested, and the regime has asserted control over all television stations and intimidates 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 cheerleaders for Vladimir Putin’s regime. It’s still not as bad as in the old USSR, when the government owned, operated and rigorously censored every newspaper and broadcaster 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.
In the southern African nation of Zimbabwe, which has suffered years of misrule (the nation’s economy has all but disintegrated; inflation currently stands at a mind-boggling 11 million percent!) by left-wing strongman Robert Mugabe, elections earlier this year appear to have brought a miraculous victory by the opposition party – miraculous because the majority of the electorate displayed the courage to vote for the opposition despite the most flagrant goon-squad tactics by the government – but Mugabe’s regime delayed publishing the election results for over a month, and then contrived a runoff election from which the opposition finally withdrew, calling it a “violent sham.”

Clearly, freedom and democracy come at a price, and as we pull a lever or mark a ballot between now and next Tuesday, 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!