Voting is a privilege and responsibility

By Dr. Richard Kelley

As I write this article, many people seem to feel that America’s Election Day, November 8, is still some time off in the future. Wake up! It’s just 10 days from now. Voting has already started, with more people than ever taking advantage of the absentee-ballot and early walk-in voting options that are now available almost everywhere across the country.

The photo at right shows me fulfilling my civic duty at 9:00 a.m. last Monday, October 24, as I dropped my ballot in a secure ballot box near my home in Grand Lake, Colorado, a tiny town located high in the Rocky Mountains. Although the temperature was 37 degrees F (3 degrees C) and there was fresh snow on nearby peaks, I wore my Outrigger – Hokulea aloha shirt to remind myself of my Pacific heritage as well as the many global challenges and unbelievable opportunities available today.

Throughout the United States, political candidates at all levels are making a final drive to deliver their message and collect votes. The political mud is flying thick and fast.

For most in the U.S., the campaigning, town hall meetings and debates have become more than boring and annoying, but I feel that is an acceptable price to pay for the freedom of expression and open elections we so greatly cherish. Campaigning and secure, honest elections are hard-won rights that many Americans and others fought and died for in years past, and that gift should be valued and appreciated by those living in today’s dangerous, complicated world.

I think most Americans would agree with what Abraham Lincoln is reputed to have said a century and a half ago: “You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time.”

Accordingly, on November 8, 2016, we are once again about to put our faith in the collective judgment of the electorate.

I hope that every eligible member of the Outrigger ‘ohana will take the time and make the effort to vote in this important election.

Unfortunately, Hawai’i, our headquarters location, consistently ranks at or near the bottom of voter turnout rates in the 50 U.S. states. According to the Honolulu Star-Advertiser, only 34.7 percent of voters cast ballots in the state’s primary elections this August – an all-time low. In the last general elections – 2014 – just 52.3 percent of Hawai’i’s registered voters went to the polls. Remember, these are registered voters. However, since not all eligible voters take the trouble to register, the percentage of eligible voters who participate in elections is even more discouraging.

Hawai’i’s repeated low voter turnout is so shameful that it is often featured in national news reports during election years. That...
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is embarrassing for me and should be for every citizen of the 50th state.

- One of the major reasons for the low turnout is a feeling many people have that their votes do not count because the state has a long history of domination by a single political party.
- Another reason is Hawai‘i’s location — two time zones past the West Coast and five time zones past the East Coast, which usually means that the outcome of presidential elections is known before the polls close in the Islands.

Don’t be fooled by such thoughts. National columnist Harvey Mackay feels that even if your favorite candidate loses, your vote is important. He has written:

* I have a theory that a large voter turnout screams out to those who were elected, “We all cared enough to vote. We will be watching you to make sure that you don’t let us down.”

* But a small turnout sends a message that people just don’t care. And that is when representatives start to think that no one is watching.

There are all sorts of stories in the press and on the Internet about how just a few votes can often make a difference in an election. Even national elections can be amazingly close.

- Recall that the margin of victory in the 2000 U.S. presidential race in five states was less than 1 percent. Al Gore won New Mexico in that election by only 366 votes.
- In Florida that year, George W. Bush beat Al Gore by only 537 votes and, perhaps, a few “hanging chads.”

Currently, the many nations ruled by despots or in which civil wars are raging are stark reminders that billions of people around the globe do not enjoy the freedoms that Americans too often seem to take for granted. Many members of the Outrigger ‘ohana came to the United States from their native lands in search of those freedoms.

Clearly, freedom and democracy come at a price.

So, as we pull a lever or mark a paper or electronic ballot between now and the second Tuesday of November, we should also take a moment to honor those who have, in the past and even today, put their lives on the line to protect our right to choose our leaders in honest, free elections.

Yes, your vote can make a difference today, tomorrow and for decades to come. Make it count!

I feel that this year’s presidential election is perhaps the most important one in my lifetime. Candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump have drastically different visions of the future of the United States of America.

As in 2012, the results of the 2016 elections will significantly affect us all for years and decades to come in terms of job opportunities, tax rates, health care, national security, immigration, honest government and freedom of choice.

In reality, we are voting not only for ourselves but also on behalf of our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.