Voting is a Privilege and Responsibility

By Dr. Richard R. Kelley

As I write this article, Election Day in the United States is just a few days away. Polling has actually already started, with more people than ever (including yours truly) taking advantage of absentee ballots and the early walk-in voting options that are now 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 and in all directions. It is getting boring and annoying but, for the United States, 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 a hard-won rights that Americans are privileged to enjoy.

And I think most Americans would agree with what Abraham Lincoln 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.” So we put our faith in the collective wisdom and judgment of the electorate.

I hope that every eligible member of the Outrigger ‘ohana will vote in this important election.

Unfortunately, our headquarters location, Hawai‘i, consistently ranks at or near the bottom of voter turnout rates in the United States. According to the Honolulu Star-Advertiser, only 36.9 percent of voters turned out for the state’s primary election in 2008.

For the 2012 primary election, just 42.3 percent of the state’s 687,500 registered voters cast ballots. Turnout was highest in Honolulu and Hawai‘i counties, which both had hot mayoral contests. About 44.2 percent of registered voters cast ballots on O‘ahu, while 42.6 percent voted on Hawai‘i Island. Maui had the lowest turnout at 30.6 percent, followed by Kaua‘i’s 39.2 percent.

Hawai‘i’s consistently low voter turnout is so shameful that it was recently featured on a CNN news segment. Reporter John D. Sutter talked to many residents and documented six major reasons for the low turnout. One of these reasons is a feeling by many people that their votes do not count due to the state’s long history of being dominated by a single party. Another is Hawai‘i’s location two time zones past the West Coast and five time zones past the East Coast, which usually means that presidential elections are decided before the polls close in the Islands.

National columnist Harvey Mackay feels that even if your favorite candidate loses, your vote is important. He recently wrote:

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.

Our government is based on majority rules, but passing on voting means the minority wins out.

I feel that this year’s presidential election is the most important one in my lifetime. Candidates Barack Obama and Mitt Romney have drastically different visions of the future of the United States of America.

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

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

Nationally, the race for the presidency between Obama and Romney is very tight and the outcome will depend on how the states’ electors vote in the Electoral College. Hawai‘i’s four Electoral College votes could prove to be the deciding margin.

There are all sorts of stories in the press and on the Internet about how one vote has often made a difference.

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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 the margin of victory in the 2000 U.S. presidential race in five states was less than 1 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 (George W. Bush vs. John Kerry) in three states was again less than 1 percent.

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, and as we pull a lever or mark a ballot between now and next Tuesday, 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 select our leaders in free elections.

Yes, your vote can make a difference today, tomorrow and for decades to come. Make it count! ⑧