



THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF HAWAII

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE ELECTIONS COMMISSION
December 2, 2009

My name is Jean Aoki, and I am speaking on behalf of the League of Women Voters of Hawaii.

For most people, Elections are the only tangible evidence that we live in a democracy. The other aspects of democracy, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, etc. are all taken for granted.

And yet, we have come to a state where even elections are no longer respected and revered for what they stand for --- without elections, there would be no democracy.

Today, we in Hawaii, are agonizing about money for schools, social welfare, rail, etc., etc., but we seem to give no thought to that process which establishes the government which can then agonize about all of the above issues. Without elections, we cannot have a democratic government.

Ever since I became more involved with elections, I have been aware that the Elections Office was never funded adequately. Somehow money for the professional development of our elections officials for example, have been considered a luxury and they have been denied much of the opportunities for attendance at conferences on the mainland that would have exposed them to fresh thinking, learning about ways of avoiding and or solving problems they share in common. Opportunities to renew their pride in their profession with new zeal to improve things that need improving.

In spite of the less than adequate funding, the State of Hawaii has been very good about removing the more obvious barriers to voter participation. In spite of the efforts of the Elections Office at voter registration and voter education within the limits of their budget, our voter participation has decreased until now we have the dubious distinction of being the state with the lowest voter participation. It is not the fault of the Elections Office. Their responsibility is to execute elections that are as faultless as possible with voters who have been informed about the process of voting, the polling sites, any ballot issues, and to make it as easy as possible to register and to vote. If we want that office to provide the civic education for our citizens, then it should have the resources to do so, including the personnel whose duties would be devoted to that.

Now we are faced with a situation which only promises to discourage voters. One obvious means of cutting costs is the reduction in the number of polling sites. While it is true that in some areas, there may be too many polling sites, cutting down drastically will only discourage voting. We can't afford to lose any more voters. Another suggestion has been to encourage absentee voting, but that only shifts the cost to the counties.

While voting by mail as in absentee voting has its merits, it fails to take advantage of our voting machines' capabilities of rejecting ballots that are not marked properly and giving voters the opportunity to make corrections. I've worked for many a year as an observer in the counting center, and I remember my sense of loss when I saw too many absentee ballots being rejected for lack of signatures on the envelopes, or having over-voted, or marked the ballot incorrectly.

Mr. Kevin Cronin will have to weigh the options before him and decide on his course of action to meet his responsibility to prepare for Election 2010/ Unless the Governor and the Legislature provides some money and immediately, he may have no other recourse than to cut where it hurts.

But this commission and the public do not have to accept that. When one thinks of democracy, the first thing that springs to one's mind are elections to select those who would represent us in the halls of power. To do anything that would discourage our people from participating in the selection of these officials is a blow to democracy. As we accept the downgrading of elections, we are accepting the degrading of democracy as a way of life where we together make vital decisions. One thing of which we are sure, we, as a people, cannot afford to do that. Democracy has been assaulted too much as it is.