

Wrong Enemy

Hawai‘i’s 2026 primary and the adversary neither party is willing to name

BY RICHARD BODIEN, SEPTEMBER 28, 2026

In 1897, Hui Aloha ‘Āina and Hui Kālai‘āina gathered signatures against annexation from the great majority of the Native Hawaiian population—more than twenty thousand names on the surviving petition alone, when fewer than forty thousand Native Hawaiians remained.¹

On August 8, 2026, roughly a third of Hawai‘i’s registered voters returned a ballot.² The comparison is unfair in obvious ways but instructive in one: participation did not collapse because the people became less capable of it. The arrangement changed.

The easy explanations are procedural: mail ballots, the elections office, and, on the right, a system rigged against Republicans. On primary night, former governor John Waihe‘e blamed the way elections are now administered. When he was lieutenant governor, he recalled, his office ran the vote and “the entire establishment was on the side of driving the numbers up.”

Representative Diamond Garcia, the House’s assistant minority floor leader, conceded “issues with Hawai‘i’s election office” but declined the rigged-election argument: Republicans, he said, have won races here “through hard work and hard campaigning.”³ He is right. Progressive challengers, now routinely dismissed on the right as socialists and communists, also lost, and lost broadly.⁴ Neither camp was cheated. Neither persuaded enough people to vote for it.

The final count was 281,214 of 846,543 registered voters: **33.2 percent**, slightly above the 32.3 percent recorded in 2024.⁵ Election-night coverage, working from a partial count, called it a record low. The final count did not sustain that. 2026 ranks second-lowest since statehood, behind only 2024.⁶

Turnout topped sixty percent in all but two primaries from statehood through 1994. Since 2016 it has stayed below forty percent in every primary but one. Mail voting cannot carry the blame: every primary since 2020 has been conducted entirely by mail, and turnout in them has ranged from 51 percent to 32.

The more interesting figure is the count, not the rate. In twelve of the fourteen primaries since 2000, between roughly 246,000 and 293,000 people voted, while the rolls grew by more than a third. The primary electorate has barely moved in a quarter century; the registered population has grown up around it.⁷ What remains is not a collapse in progress but an equilibrium. Incumbents prevailed nearly everywhere.⁸

An unreturned ballot endorses nothing. It may express exhaustion, distrust, or the reasonable conclusion that nothing consequential will change. Some of it is not resignation at all: there is a serious position, held in these islands, that voting in elections conducted under an unresolved occupation lacks legitimacy.⁹

But the ballot not returned cedes the outcome to whoever does turn out, and a narrow electorate is made of party regulars, organized interests, and the already invested. It returns incumbents; incumbency deters challengers; their absence further depresses participation.

Neither party has given non-voters a reason to participate

Republicans channel legitimate anger into cultural grievance and distrust of government while offering few serious remedies for Hawai‘i’s unaffordable housing, inadequate healthcare, low wages, dependence on imported food, and concentration of land and wealth.

Progressives identify the causes more honestly, but being right is not enough. Analysis is not organization, outrage is not strategy, and a list of grievances is not a program for governing.

MAGA supports “corporate socialism” (so does the Dem establishment)

“Corporate socialism” is not socialism in the traditional sense. It does not place productive wealth under public ownership or democratic control. It does the opposite: it uses public power to protect private wealth. Government absorbs the risk while corporations retain the profit. Losses are distributed among taxpayers; gains remain in private hands.

MAGA denounces healthcare, food assistance, housing support, and free education as socialism while defending subsidies, tax privileges, government contracts, monopoly power, and public protection for favored industries.

Establishment Democrats accept much of the same arrangement, although they administer it with more inclusive language and somewhat stronger public safeguards.¹⁰

The parties are not identical. Their differences over civil rights, reproductive freedom, immigration, labor, environmental regulation, and democratic institutions can be profound. But their economic establishments share a basic assumption: government may intervene aggressively to protect corporations, investors, banks, developers, contractors, and landowners, while assistance to ordinary people must remain limited, conditional, and constantly justified.

The real disagreement between parties is often not whether public power should support private accumulation, but which corporations should benefit, what conditions should be attached, and how politely the transfer should be described.

Hawai‘i supplies its own illustration. After Lāhainā, the Legislature directed utility regulators to cap electric utilities’ liability for economic damages from future wildfires and authorized up to \$500 million in wildfire-safety work financed by bonds that customers repay.¹¹

Republicans call it economic freedom. Democrats call it partnership. In either case, the public carries the risk and concentrated wealth collects the reward.

The real enemy

It is not the neighbor with the Trump sign or the cousin who votes for Democrats. Social liberalism and corporate government coexist quite comfortably, and Hawai‘i is the demonstration: a legislator may sincerely defend reproductive rights, Hawaiian culture, and public education while approving the entitlements, rate structures, and procurement that major economic interests require.

Those who govern here are less a party than the management of an arrangement. Officeholders, donors, contractors, consultants, unions, and institutional allies are each protecting a position. They are held together by common dependence on the system that sustains them. It works largely in the open—contributions, lobbying, contracts, revolving-door employment—but its most consequential work is done where no testimony is taken: in committee referrals and the closing hours of conference, where reform bills that passed both chambers are allowed to die without explanation.¹² The outcomes are settled before the public is in the room.

The growth coalition is not only landowners, developers, utilities, insurers, banks, and tourism conglomerates.¹³ It includes organized labor: the building trades need projects, the public-sector unions a revenue base. In this primary the carpenters' union and its contractor partners spent nearly \$5 million through a single committee, more than \$2 million of it supporting Kaua'i Mayor Derek Kawakami for the Democratic nomination for lieutenant governor, against a rival who had refused corporate PAC money.¹⁴

Any movement serious about land here will have to tell union members what else could employ them. There are plenty of answers—this blog is full of them—and there will always be housing, hospitals, and schools to build, and to rebuild after disasters.

The precondition for expanding participation is money—money that does not come from the growth coalition—and Hawai'i has already run the experiment. A public funding pilot for Hawai'i County Council races, enacted in 2008, paid \$363,060 to sixteen candidates in the 2010 and 2012 elections; by 2014 its fund had run short, and the program expired.¹⁵ The Legislature has cited it ever since as the model for a statewide program it keeps declining to enact—most recently this year, when the Senate passed one unanimously and the House never gave it a hearing.¹⁶ What lawmakers did approve was narrower: a modest increase in partial public financing, and a first-in-the-nation law stripping corporations of the power to spend in Hawai'i elections, which takes effect in 2027. Neither, as the political scientist Colin Moore has pointed out, takes anything away from the advantage incumbents hold over challengers.¹⁷

It is tempting to go further and abolish the parties altogether. Representative Garcia, on the same primary night, argued the opposite: what Hawai'i needs, he said, is “a strong two-party system.”¹⁸

If concentrated wealth converts money into access, stripping away parties removes one of the few structures that can aggregate small contributions and volunteer labor, and hands the field to whoever already has a donor list. The problem is not that parties exist. It is that one party faces no competition and the other party has no program.

The enemy is not the person across the aisle

It is a political economy that keeps ordinary people arguing about labels while concentrated wealth sets the terms of the argument.

Two-thirds of Hawai'i's registered voters declined to help choose their government. They were not wrong to suspect that the outcome had been narrowed in advance. The arrangement continues—not because most people approve of it, but because no one has inspired them to act otherwise.

The sooner we get ranked-choice voting, the better. We need to make room for new parties, policies, and politics. Honolulu voters can take a first step on November 3.¹⁹

1. Noenoe K. Silva, *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 123–63. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822386223> The surviving Hui Aloha ‘Āina petition bears 21,269 signatures—more than half of the 39,504 Hawaiians and part-Hawaiians, children included, counted in the census of 1896. The Hui Kālai‘āina petitions, which asked for restoration of the monarchy, reportedly carried about 17,000 more; their whereabouts are unknown. Because the two may overlap, the combined figure of roughly 38,000 often cited is best read as a ceiling. Census figures: Office of Hawaiian Affairs, “Estimated Population of the Hawaiian Islands, 1778–1896.” <https://www.oha.org/wp-content/uploads/Estimated-Population-of-the-Hawaiian-Islands-1778-1896.pdf>
2. State of Hawai‘i, Office of Elections, “Primary Election 2026, State of Hawai‘i—Statewide: Summary Report, Final,” fourth printout, August 14, 2026, “Registration and Turnout.” <https://npr.brightspotcdn.com/bd/7b/c761f33743289f0acb816fc2eef3/histatewide-081426-4thprintout.pdf>
3. HNN Staff, “Democratic, Republican Leaders Offer Analysis of Primary Results, Voter Turnout,” *Hawaii News Now*, August 8, 2026. <https://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/2026/08/09/democratic-republican-leaders-offer-analysis-primary-results-voter-turnout/> Garcia’s full remark: “Do I believe there are issues with Hawai‘i’s election office and system? Absolutely. But I’m not gonna sit here and say, if we lose the election, it’s rigged.” Other explanations: Governor Josh Green said “some people are heartsick over the corruption” (KHON2, August 9, 2026 <https://www.khon2.com/hawaii-elections-2026/hawaii-primary-election-voter-turnouts/>), two weeks after Lieutenant Governor Sylvia Luke was indicted on bribery charges (*Hawaii News Now*, July 25, 2026 <https://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/2026/07/25/luke-among-5-indicted-by-grand-jury-following-massive-bribery-probe/>); the political scientist Colin Moore cited a ballot without many races voters were “really excited for” (*Hawaii News Now*, August 7, 2026 <https://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/2026/08/07/hawaii-election-officials-urge-last-minute-votes-primary-turnout-lags/>).
4. Final summary report (note 2). U.S. Representative Ed Case defeated state Senator Jarrett Keohokalole, described by Al Jazeera and Reuters as a progressive challenger, 55.6 to 35.6 percent; they noted that the result “stands out from a recent surge for left-wing candidates” elsewhere. “Incumbents Secure Hawaii Primary Wins, Defying Progressive Challengers,” *Al Jazeera*, August 9, 2026. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/8/9/incumbents-secure-hawaii-primary-wins-defying-progressive-challengers> Insurgent challengers to senior Democratic legislators fared no better: Senator Donovan Dela Cruz over Nani Brown, 66.8 to 24.4; Senator Donna Mercado Kim over Christy MacPherson, 50.8 to 42.0; Representative Mark Hashem over Kahi Pacarro, 52.1 to 39.5. Chad Blair, “Hawai‘i Legislature: Most Incumbents Won Easily,” *Honolulu Civil Beat*, August 8, 2026. <https://www.civilbeat.org/2026/08/hawai%CA%BBi-legislature-early-results-show-most-incumbents-winning/>
5. Final summary report (note 2): 274,865 mail and 6,349 in-person ballots, 281,214 in all. For 2024 (271,345 of 839,618): Office of Elections, “Registration and Turnout Statistics,” Primary Elections, 1959–2024, statewide. <https://elections.hawaii.gov/resources/registration-voter-turnout-statistics/> The Office’s separate Voting Report for the 2026 primary, last updated August 15, 2026, records 281,079 ballots returned—135 fewer than the final summary report. <https://>

elections.hawaii.gov/resources/absentee-voting-report/ The figures here follow the final summary report.

6. HNN, “Democratic, Republican Leaders” (note 3), reported “initial statewide voter turnout hovering at just 28.3%” and a primary that “may mark one of the lowest participation rates in the state’s history”; its summary called the turnout “record-low.” Before the vote, *Honolulu Civil Beat* noted that 2024 “saw the lowest primary turnout since statehood.” “Hawai‘i Could Hit New Low for Voter Turnout This Year,” *Honolulu Civil Beat*, August 2026. <https://www.civilbeat.org/2026/08/hawaii-could-hit-new-low-for-voter-turnout-this-year/> The four lowest primaries in the official series: 2024 (32.3 percent), 2026 (33.2), 2016 (34.8), and 2008 (36.9).
7. Office of Elections, “Registration and Turnout Statistics” (note 5); author’s calculations. Before 1996, primary turnout fell below 60 percent only in 1984 (55.6 percent) and 1992 (58.1). Since 2016: 34.8 (2016), 38.6 (2018), 51.2 (2020), 39.8 (2022), 32.3 (2024), 33.2 (2026). Act 136, Session Laws of Hawai‘i 2019, required all elections to be conducted by mail beginning in 2020 <https://elections.hawaii.gov/main/implementing-elections-by-mail/>; the high 2020 figure also coincided with the pandemic and an open race for Honolulu mayor. In 2000, 262,485 of 629,162 registered voters cast primary ballots; in 2026, 281,214 of 846,543—registration up 34.6 percent, ballots up 7.1 percent. The only primaries outside the 246,299–293,016 range were 2020 (407,190) and 2022 (340,159). Part of the long fall in the turnout rate is thus a denominator effect: the rolls have grown far faster than the number of people who vote.
8. Blair, “Most Incumbents Won Easily” (note 4). Only one incumbent legislator lost to the voters: Senator Les Ihara Jr., after forty years in the Legislature, to Representative Jackson Sayama—himself a sitting legislator—61.6 to 29.2 percent (note 2). Two Republican primaries, Senate District 20 and House District 43, ended in exact ties and were decided on August 15 by drawing names, sealed in plastic eggs, from a lauhala basket; both incumbents lost the draw. The Hawai‘i Supreme Court upheld Senator Kurt Fevella’s loss (Hawai‘i Public Radio, September 18, 2026 <https://www.hawaiipublicradio.org/local-news/2026-09-18/supreme-court-rejects-fevellas-challenge-to-tiebreaking-loss-for-ewa-beach-seat>) but voided the District 43 result—two voters from another district had been given its ballots, and the drawing procedure had never been adopted by rule—and ordered a rerun on November 3. *Souza v. Nago*, No. SCEC-26-0000598 (Haw. Sept. 4, 2026). <https://law.justia.com/cases/hawaii/supreme-court/2026/scec-26-0000598-1.html> The House Speaker and the Senate President, among others, were reelected on primary night because no one had filed against them for November.
9. The argument that the Hawaiian Kingdom continues to exist under a prolonged U.S. occupation is most closely associated with the political scientist David Keanu Sai. In a memorandum of February 25, 2018, to members of the Hawai‘i judiciary, Alfred M. de Zayas, then the UN Independent Expert on the Promotion of a Democratic and Equitable International Order, wrote that “the lawful political status of the Hawaiian Islands is that of a sovereign nation-state in continuity; but a nation-state that is under a strange form of occupation by the United States.” https://hawaiiankingdom.org/pdf/Dr_deZayas_Memo_2_25_2018.pdf Independent experts speak in their personal capacity, not for the United Nations. Hawai‘i’s courts have rejected the argument: “Individuals claiming to be citizens of the Kingdom and not of the State are not exempt from application of the State’s laws.” *State v. Kaulia*, 128 Hawai‘i 479, 487, 291 P.3d 377, 385 (2013). <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/court/hi-supreme-court/1620078.html>
10. Act 114, Session Laws of Hawai‘i 2022 (H.B. 2510), raised the minimum wage from \$10.10 to \$12.00 in October 2022, then to \$14.00 in 2024, \$16.00 in 2026, and \$18.00 on January 1, 2028, with no provision for increases after that. Department of Labor and Industrial Relations,

“Minimum Wage and Overtime.” <https://labor.hawaii.gov/wsd/minimum-wage/> A 2024 bill to index the wage to the Urban Hawaii Consumer Price Index after 2028 (S.B. 2928) died in committee; it cited an MIT estimate that a single adult without children needed \$22.05 an hour in Hawai‘i in 2023. <https://legiscan.com/HI/text/SB2928/id/2898021>

11. Act 258, Session Laws of Hawai‘i 2025 (S.B. 897). Hawaiian Electric described it as “directing the Public Utilities Commission to establish a liability cap for future wildfires, and authorizing securitization to finance \$500 million in wildfire safety improvements, helping customer affordability.” Hawaiian Electric Industries, Form 8-K, Exhibit 99, August 7, 2025. <https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/354707/000035470725000038/heixhibit99-8xk08x07x25.htm> Securitization bonds are repaid through a dedicated charge on customer bills. The Attorney General’s office argued that cheaper financing could help customers as well as the utility, and the Public Utilities Commission welcomed the \$500 million limit as a protection for ratepayers. Testimony on S.B. 897, H.D. 2, House Committee on Finance, March 31, 2025. https://legiscan.com/HI/supplement/SB897/id/561463/Hawaii-2025-SB897-SB897_HD2_TESTIMONY_FIN_03-31-25.pdf
12. H.B. 371 (2025), which would have barred campaign contributions from executives of state and county contractors and grantees, passed both chambers unanimously (“Hawai‘i Lawmakers Kill Pay-to-Play Bill—Again,” *Honolulu Civil Beat*, April 2025 <https://www.civilbeat.org/2025/04/hawai%CA%BBi-lawmakers-kill-pay-to-play-bill-again/>), then “died in the last hour of the last day of conference committee because House and Senate leadership wanted it to die. As is typical, no rationale was offered.” “State Watchdogs Are Keeping the Pressure On for Government Reform,” *Honolulu Civil Beat*, June 2025. <https://www.civilbeat.org/2025/06/state-watchdogs-are-keeping-the-pressure-on-for-government-reform> Its 2026 successor died after changes made by the Senate Ways and Means Committee “without any public discussion.” Patti Epler and Chad Blair, “Sunshine Scorecard: One Big Bill, A Couple Small Things, The Rest Fizzled,” *Honolulu Civil Beat*, May 10, 2026. <https://www.civilbeat.org/2026/05/sunshine-scorecard-one-big-bill-a-couple-small-things-the-rest-fizzled/> On referrals to the money committees, see “‘The Stopper Committees’: Are Bills Sent to Money Committees Just to Die?,” *Honolulu Civil Beat*, April 2025. <https://www.civilbeat.org/2025/04/the-stopper-committees-are-bills-sent-to-money-committees-just-to-die/>
13. The concept descends from Harvey Molotch, “The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place,” *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 2 (1976): 309–32. For Hawai‘i, the classic account is George Cooper and Gavan Daws, *Land and Power in Hawaii: The Democratic Years* (Honolulu: Benchmark Books, 1985).
14. HNN Staff, “Carpenters Union-Backed PAC Pours Nearly \$5M into Primary Campaigns,” *Hawaii News Now*, August 3, 2026. <https://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/2026/08/03/carpenters-union-backed-pac-pours-nearly-5m-into-primary-campaigns/> The Pacific Resource Partnership’s committee, For A Better Tomorrow, reported about \$4.7 million in primary-season spending, more than \$2 million of it supporting Kawakami; Representative Della Au Belatti had pledged not to accept corporate PAC money. PRP is funded primarily by the Hawaii Regional Council of Carpenters and its contractors. Kawakami won the nomination 62.2 to 24.5 percent (note 2). For the full cycle, the committee had raised \$7.3 million since November 2024: “Big Money in Hawai‘i Politics—The Carpenters Union Is Crushing Everyone,” *Honolulu Civil Beat*, August 2026. <https://www.civilbeat.org/2026/08/big-money-in-hawaii-politics-the-carpenters-union-is-crushing-everyone/>
15. Act 244, Session Laws of Hawai‘i 2008. On September 1, 2013, the Campaign Spending Commission found the Hawaii Election Campaign Fund below the \$3.5 million minimum the

Act required, so the program did not operate in 2014. <https://ags.hawaii.gov/campaign/cc/public-funding-programs/hawaii-county-council-comprehensive-public-funding/>
Disbursements: S.B. 2313 (2026), §1. <https://data.capitol.hawaii.gov/sessions/session2026/bills/SB2313.pdf>

16. S.B. 2313 (2026), like S.B. 1543 (2023) and S.B. 51 (2025), names the pilot as its model. The Senate passed it unanimously; House Judiciary chair David Tarnas declined to hear it. “The Sunshine Blog: Budget Constraints Doom Full Public Funding of Elections,” *Honolulu Civil Beat*, March 2026. <https://www.civilbeat.org/2026/03/the-sunshine-blog-budget-constraints-doom-full-public-funding-of-elections/>
17. Epler and Blair, “Sunshine Scorecard” (note 12): legislators agreed “to modestly beef up” partial public financing, “a program few if any candidates have used.” S.B. 2471, signed as Act 11 on May 14, 2026, passed the Senate unanimously and the House with one dissent and takes effect in 2027 (Spectrum News, May 15, 2026 <https://spectrumlocalnews.com/hi/hawaii/news/2026/05/15/green-signs-bill-to-restrict-corporate-political-spending>). Lawmakers told *Civil Beat* it could curb money flowing through the Pacific Resource Partnership to super PACs, though not union political spending generally.
18. HNN, “Democratic, Republican Leaders” (note 3). Garcia: “You can increase registration, which is what those things try to do, but turnout is a whole different thing. What we need, I believe, is a strong two-party system, and that will increase turnout.”
19. Act 47, Session Laws of Hawai‘i 2022, already requires ranked-choice voting in stand-alone federal special elections and in special elections for county council vacancies. Ballotpedia, “Electoral Systems in Hawaii.” https://ballotpedia.org/Electoral_systems_in_Hawaii Honolulu Charter Question 5 would use it for mayor, council, and prosecuting attorney, in a single November election, from 2032 <https://www.honolulucitycouncil.org/oahuvotes>; it would not reach state or congressional races and would need state authorization (Hawai‘i Public Radio, July 21, 2026 <https://www.hawaiipublicradio.org/local-news/2026-07-21/honolulu-charter-amendment-questions-finalized-with-some-big-proposals-left-out>). A 2026 bill to require it statewide and abolish primaries (H.B. 2528) died without a hearing. <https://legiscan.com/HI/text/HB2528/id/3339857> Republican Party chair Shirlene Ostrov says the Honolulu measure “introduces confusion to a ballot” (*Hawaii News Now*, September 25, 2026 <https://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/2026/09/25/ranked-choice-voting-proposal-draws-gop-opposition-ahead-november-vote/>).