

Voter Participation Rates in Hawaii Before 1900

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Thirty-eight percent of the population of Hawaii registered to vote in the 1970 general election, and 32.2 percent of the population actually cast ballots. The registration rate was the highest in island history.

Voter participation rates during the 19th century were much lower and exceedingly variable. When Hawaii held its first modern election, on January 6, 1851, approximately 13.9 percent of the population of Honolulu went to the polls. The 1862 election was a high-water mark, with a turnout of 20.9 percent. Four years later only 1.6 percent cast ballots. Another peak was reached in 1887, with 16.7 percent. Participation rates dropped precipitously during the following decade, and by 1897 less than one percent of the population was voting. The 1862 level was not reached again until after World War II.

Although the Constitution of 1840 provided for a "representative body" of legislators, more than ten years passed before a formal election was held. An 1842 law specified that representatives were to be chosen by public petitions sent to the King, and this procedure was followed for the rest of the decade.¹ Then, on July 30, 1850, two new election laws were approved. The first provided for annual elections, to be held the first Monday of January, and set the qualifications of voters. Under this act, a voter had to be a male subject (either native or naturalized) or denizen, at least 20 years of age, who had lived at least one year in Hawaii, and was not insane or an unpardoned felon. The second law set the size of the House of Representatives at twenty-four, including two to be elected from Honolulu and one each from twenty-two single-member districts in rural Oahu and on the neighbor islands. Elective offices included representatives and road supervisors but not, of course, members

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of the House of Nobles or the King.² These two laws were the basis for the first general election in the islands, held the following January.

Both frequency of elections and legislative apportionment were changed over the years. The Constitution of 1852 provided for reapportionment every six years, to be based on official census results.³ The 1853 Legislature increased the number of Representatives from Honolulu to four and from Hilo, Lahaina, and Molokai-Lanai to two each.⁴ Elections were put on a biennial basis after 1856.⁵ The Constitution of 1894 revised district boundaries and moved the biennial elections to the last Wednesday of September.⁶

Voter qualifications also were changed from time to time. The 1864 Constitution added a property or income requirement: voters had to have either real property valued (over and above encumbrances) at \$150 or more, or a leasehold paying rent of \$25 or more annually, or a yearly income not less than \$75. Moreover, if born since 1840, they had to be able to read and write.⁷ The real property/income requirement was repealed in 1874 but was reinstated, in modified form, by the Constitution of 1887. The latter document made the House of Nobles an elective body for the first time in Hawaiian history, but with considerably more restrictive voter requirements than for voters for Representatives. Property worth \$3,000 or an annual income of \$600 or more were necessary to vote for Nobles, but no property or income minimums were set for voters for Representatives. The residence requirement was one year to vote for members of the lower house but three years for those of the upper house. All voters had to be able to read Hawaiian, English, or another European language (although this requirement was waived for voters for representative born in 1840 or before) and had to be of Hawaiian, American, or European birth or descent.⁸ Similar requirements were set by the Constitution of 1894, which in addition changed the name of the upper house to Senate and provided for fractional votes.⁹

These changes in eligibility requirements were a major factor in the changes observed in voter participation rates, but they were not the only reason. The poor turnout for the 1853 election was attributed to "the prevailing epidemic" of smallpox, and a similar slump two years later was blamed on "extensively stormy weather."¹⁰ Lack of publicity as well as a new property requirement may have been partly responsible for the sharp decline between 1864 and 1866, causing an editorial writer to comment: "There was an election held on Monday last, though probably not more than fifty persons outside the circle of Government officers were aware of the fact."¹¹ Voters for delegates to the 1894 constitutional convention were compelled to sign an oath of allegiance to the revolutionary regime, a condition that discouraged many.¹² The lack of any real contest

was a factor on occasion, especially in 1897: "For the first time the saloons were allowed to remain open. Indeed there was no necessity for closing them; being no independent or rival candidates there was no chance for an argument"—and only 0.9 percent of the population voted.¹³

Records of voter participation are surprisingly few in number and unreliable in quality. Official documents filed in the State Archives are submitted by election inspectors, certifying the election of the successful candidates but not presenting the magnitude of the vote. Such standard sources as the annual reports of government agencies, Thrums' *Annual*, and the general histories by Kuykendall, Daws, and others contain few if any references to the size of the vote. No systematic compilation of election totals, either in manuscript or printed form, appears to have been undertaken for the pre-annexation period. For most years, therefore, it has been necessary to rely on newspaper accounts. Although the Honolulu papers have invariably reported the vote cast in Honolulu district, their coverage of rural Oahu and the neighbor islands has been much less comprehensive. Ambiguities in terminology, obvious errors in addition, and misprints have been legion, and comparison of data in different newspapers for the same date or different editions of the same paper have revealed numerous discrepancies. As early as 1854 the editor of the *Polynesian* complained that "the inspectors of elections in the several districts of the islands do not comply with the provisions of the law of 1851, which provides that they shall send a copy of their certificate of election, to the governor. . . . For want of such official reports we are compelled to rely on such information as we can obtain from private letters, hearsay, &c; and we are sometimes misinformed in regard to facts."¹⁴ In 1888, the Commission Upon the Election Laws reported to the Legislature that "the commission has actually not been able to procure either the registration at any recent election or the number of votes polled."¹⁵

Even when voting statistics were published, doubts regarding the totals sometimes remained. The same commission called attention to a district where "minors were permitted to register and vote, and voters were imported to swamp the list."¹⁶ They concluded: "No one is responsible for the ballot. . . . The manner of counting the vote, and ascertaining the result only awaits a William M. Tweed. . . ."¹⁷

Interpretation of the data is further complicated by the fact that the published accounts were sometimes limited to tallies of the number of votes cast, without indicating the number of voters who submitted these ballots. This was, of course, no problem in single-member districts, where each voter was allowed only one vote. In Honolulu, however, each voter could vote for as many as four candidates throughout most of this period. The situation became even more complex in 1894 and 1897, when it was

TABLE I

PERSONS VOTING IN GENERAL ELECTIONS IN HAWAII: 1851 TO 1897

<i>Election date</i>	<i>Honolulu</i>	<i>Oahu</i>	<i>All islands</i>	<i>Percent of population¹</i>		
				<i>Honolulu</i>	<i>Oahu</i>	<i>All islands</i>
Representatives:						
1851: Jan. 6	2,000	...	...	13.9	...	...
1852: Jan. 5	1,200	...	...	8.7	...	...
1853: Jan. 3	983	...	...	7.2	...	...
1854: Jan. 2	2,169*	...	...	18.9	...	...
1855: Jan. 1	851	...	...	7.1	...	...
1856: Jan. 7	2,181*	...	...	17.6	...	...
1858: Jan. 4	2,111	3,656	12,673	16.0	17.8	17.7
1860: Jan. 2	1,776*	...	...	12.7	...	...
1862: Jan. 6	2,962	...	...	20.9	...	...
1864: Jan. 4	2,408	4,222	...	17.3	20.6	...
1866: Jan. 1	218*	...	...	1.6	...	...
1868: Feb. 3	607	1,539	...	4.4	7.7	...
1870: Feb. 7	921	1,854	...	6.5	9.1	...
1872: Feb. 5	1,275	2,268	...	8.7	11.0	...
1874: Feb. 2	1,336	...	...	9.3	...	...
1876: Feb. 2	1,402*	2,674*	...	10.3	13.9	...
1878: Feb. 6	1,179*	2,284*	...	8.6	11.7	...
1880: Feb. 4	1,490	2,635	...	9.6	11.9	...
1882: Feb. 1	1,451	2,616	...	8.3	10.8	...
1884: Feb. 6	1,942	3,045	8,825	9.8	11.2	11.2
1886: Feb. 3	2,157	3,416	...	10.1	11.7	...
1887: Sept. 12	3,619*	4,964*	...	16.7	16.8	...
1890: Feb. 5	2,990	3,876	11,671	13.3	12.7	13.4
1892: Feb. 3	2,750	3,560	...	11.1	10.6	...
1894: May 2 ²	1,252*	1,455*	...	4.8	4.1	...
Oct. 29	909*	1,425	2,903*	3.4	3.9	2.9
1897: Sept. 29	283*	397*	...	0.9	0.9	...
Nobles/Senators:						
1887: Sept. 12	1,519*	1,636*	...	7.0	5.5	...
1890: Feb. 5	...	1,739	3,187	...	5.7	3.7
1892: Feb. 3	1,347*	1,449*	...	5.5	4.3	...
1894: Oct. 29	...	960	1,445*	...	2.6	1.4

* Partly estimated.

¹ As of January 1 nearest election date.² For delegates to Constitutional Convention.*Source:* Newspapers and reports cited in text, footnotes 19 and 20.

possible for a voter to give all of his votes to a single candidate, spread them evenly among two or more candidates, or even cast half-votes.¹⁸ It is thus necessary sometimes to estimate the number of voters by dividing the total votes cast by the number of votes allowed per voter, a procedure that may slightly understate the actual figure.

In spite of these difficulties, it has been possible to compile a reasonably satisfactory set of statistics on voter participation in Hawaii before 1900. Table 1 presents data on the number of persons voting, for Honolulu, all Oahu, and all islands combined, in each general election from 1851 to 1897. Asterisks indicate estimates based on the assumption that all voters cast as many votes as they were allowed. Unfortunately, neighbor island data were frequently omitted in available sources. The same is true of the series on voters registered for each general election, shown in table 2.

TABLE 2
PERSONS REGISTERED TO VOTE IN GENERAL ELECTIONS: 1868 TO 1897

Election date	Honolulu	Oahu	All islands	Percent of population ²		
				Honolulu	Oahu	All islands
Representatives:						
1868: Feb. 3	860	...	...	6.3	...	...
1870: Feb. 7	1,336	...	...	9.4	...	...
1872: Feb. 5	1,900	...	...	13.0	...	...
1876: Feb. 2	2,300	...	...	16.9	...	...
1880: Feb. 4	2,159	...	...	13.9	...	...
1882: Feb. 1	1,945	...	...	11.2	...	...
1884: Feb. 6	2,743	...	13,300	13.9	...	16.9
1887: Sept. 12	...	5,008	14,598	...	16.9	17.2
1890: Feb. 5	...	...	14,113	...	...	16.2
1894: May 2 ³	1,514	...	...	5.8	...	...
Oct. 29	1,589	1,917	5,202	5.9	5.3	5.2
1897: Sept. 29	649	816	2,693	2.1	1.9	2.3
Nobles/Senators:						
1887: Sept. 12	...	1,716	2,997	...	5.8	3.5
1894: Oct. 29	1,106	1,230	2,008	4.1	3.4	2.0

¹ Listing limited to elections for which data are available; for complete list, see table 1.

² As of January 1 nearest election date.

³ For delegates to Constitutional Convention.

Source: Newspapers and reports cited in text, footnotes 19 and 20.

These data were compiled from newspaper accounts and other sources, most of them unofficial.¹⁹ The columns on voters as a percent of total population were based on intercensal estimates prepared by the Hawaii State Department of Planning and Economic Development.²⁰

It is obvious from cursory examination of these tables that voter participation plummeted during the decade preceding annexation. The role of more restrictive eligibility requirements—property or income, and ability to speak, read, and write Hawaiian or English, to name the most important—has already been mentioned. Another factor, however, was the changing demographic structure of the islands. Neither women, children, nor foreign-born Orientals were given the franchise, and these groups accounted for a constantly shifting fraction of the total population. The number of males per 100 females, for example, rose from 110.1 in 1850 to 198.7 in 1896, and aliens from China or Japan increased from 0.5 percent of the population in 1853 to 38.3 percent in 1896.²¹ Unfortunately, lack of accurate annual data on age, sex, and nationality of the population precludes the computation of more refined participation rates.

TABLE 3

NATIONALITY OF REGISTERED VOTERS IN HAWAII: 1887-1888

Nationality	Percent distribution			Percent of population registered ¹		
	Popula- tion ¹	Registered voters		Represent- atives	Nobles	
		Represent.	Nobles			
All nationalities — —	100.0	100.0	100.0	17.1	3.5	
Natives and half-castes — —	49.7	64.0	35.5	22.0	2.5	
Hawaii born of foreign parents — — —	5.6	1.3	4.5	4.0	2.8	
Americans — — —	2.3	5.5	22.0	40.4	33.0	
British — — —	1.5	4.6	18.4	51.0	41.9	
Germans — — —	1.5	3.0	8.6	33.6	19.7	
Portuguese — — —	10.5	19.3	4.8	31.3	1.6	
Other nationalities ² — —	28.7	2.3	6.2	1.4	0.8	

¹ Based on average of totals obtained in censuses of December 27, 1884 and December 28, 1890.

² Includes Chinese, Japanese, French, Norwegians, South Sea Islanders, and other groups.

Source: Bureau of Public Instruction, *Report of the General Superintendent of the Census, 1890*, table 3; Thos. G. Thrush, *Hawaiian Almanac and Annual for 1890*, p. 106.

Statistics on voter participation by nationality are available for two dates, 1887 and 1890, and these data appear in tables 3 and 4. Natives and half-castes (as they were then called) accounted for almost half of the population, 64.0 percent of the voters registered to vote for representative and 35.5 percent of those registered to vote for Nobles in 1887. Americans made up only 2.3 percent of the population but 22.0 percent of the electorate for Nobles. A question in the 1890 census revealed that Chinese and Japanese accounted for 51.8 percent of all males of voting age but none of the registered voters.

These tables chart the wide swings in the extent of voter participation in Hawaii during the 19th century, and reveal a striking contrast with the islands of today. As a percent of total population, the Honolulu vote rose from 13.9 in 1851 to 20.9 in 1862, dropped to 1.6 in 1866, climbed to 16.7 in 1887, and fell to 0.9 in 1897. The rise thereafter was rapid. All-island figures cited in table 5 show that 6.2 percent of the population voted in 1900, 8.9 percent in 1920, 17.6 percent in 1940, 29.7 percent in

TABLE 4

NATIONALITY OF REGISTERED VOTERS IN HAWAII: DECEMBER 28, 1890

Nationality	Percent distribution		Percent of males 20 and over registered
	Males 20 and over	Registered voters	
All nationalities	—	—	33.9
Native	—	28.6	76.4
Half-caste	—	2.7	71.3
Hawaii born of foreign parents	—	0.7	53.1
American	—	2.7	58.9
British	—	2.1	59.4
German	—	1.4	66.3
French	—	0.1	50.0
Norwegian	—	0.3	63.4
Portuguese	—	7.9	66.0
Chinese	—	31.2	0
Japanese	—	20.6	0
Polynesian	—	0.8	12.5
Other nationalities	—	0.8	40.7

Source: Bureau of Public Instruction, *Report of the General Superintendent of the Census, 1890*, tables 5 and 7.

TABLE 5

REGISTERED VOTERS AND VOTES CAST, FOR HAWAII: 1900 TO 1970

<i>Election date</i>		<i>Registered voters</i>	<i>Votes cast</i> ¹	<i>Percent of population</i> ²	
				<i>Registered</i>	<i>Voting</i>
1900: Nov. 6	—	—	11,216	9,589	7.3
1910: Nov. 8	—	—	14,442	13,541	7.5
1920: Nov. 2 ³	—	—	26,335	22,833	10.3
1930: Nov. 4	—	—	52,127	43,544	14.2
1940: Nov. 5	—	—	87,321	74,538	20.7
1950: Nov. 7	—	—	141,319	118,704	28.3
1960: Nov. 8	—	—	202,059	188,206	31.9
1970: Nov. 3	—	—	291,681	246,235	32.0

¹ For Delegate to Congress, 1900 and 1910; for any office, 1920–1970.

² Based on official U.S. Census counts, including armed forces.

³ First election for which women were eligible to vote.

Source: Archives of Hawaii, official records of elections of 1900–1950; Office of the Lieutenant Governor, *Voter Registration Statistics, 1959–1968* and *Result of Votes Cast, General Election, Tuesday, November 3, 1970, State of Hawaii*; Robert C. Schmitt, *Demographic Statistics of Hawaii: 1778–1965* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1968), p. 10; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1970 Census of Population, Advance Report, Final Population Counts, Hawaii*, PC (VI)-13.

1960, and 32.0 percent in 1970. In statistical terms, at least, Hawaiian democracy has survived its uncertain beginnings and has passed through seven decades of growth.

NOTES

¹ Lorrin A. Thurston, ed., *The Fundamental Law of Hawaii* (Honolulu: The Hawaiian Gazette Co., Ltd., 1904), pp. 6, 11, 12.

² *Penal Code of the Hawaiian Islands...1850*, pp. 161–166. A denizen was an alien who had been granted, by the King, "all the rights, privileges and immunities of a native" (*Civil Code of the Hawaiian Islands...1859*, p. 94).

³ Thurston, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

⁴ *Laws of 1853*, pp. 24–25.

⁵ *Civil Code...1859*, p. 187.

⁶ Thurston, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 177. See also L. 1864–65, pp. 65–68, and L. 1868, pp. 14–20.

- ⁸ L. 1874, Ch. XLVI, pp. 45–46; Thurston, *op. cit.*, pp. 189–191.
- ⁹ Thurston, *op. cit.*, pp. 223–225.
- ¹⁰ P, Jan. 8, 1853, p. 138, and Jan. 6, 1855, p. 138.
- ¹¹ PCA, Jan. 6, 1866.
- ¹² Gavan Daws, *Shoal of Time* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1968), p. 281.
- ¹³ HG, Oct. 1, 1897, p. 1.
- ¹⁴ P, Jan. 28, 1854, p. 150.
- ¹⁵ *Report of the Commission Upon the Election Laws of the Hawaiian Kingdom to the Legislature of 1888*, pp. 4–5.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ¹⁸ Thurston, *op. cit.*, p. 223; PCA, Sept. 29, 1897, p. 3.
- ¹⁹ P for Jan. 11, 1851, Jan. 7, 1854, Jan. 6, 1855, Jan. 12, 1856, and Jan. 7, 1860; PCA for Jan. 28, 1858, Jan. 7, 1864, Jan. 14, 1864, Jan. 6, 1866, Feb. 8, 1868, Feb. 12, 1870, Feb. 7, 1884, Oct. 29, 1894, and Nov. 6, 1894; HG for Jan. 6, 1866, Feb. 9, 1870, Feb. 7, 1872, Feb. 4, 1874, Feb. 2, 1876, Feb. 9, 1876, Feb. 13, 1878, Feb. 11, 1880, Feb. 9, 1886, Sept. 13, 1887, May 4, 1894, and Oct. 30, 1894; DB for Feb. 2, 1882, Feb. 7, 1882, Feb. 4, 1892, Feb. 3, 1894, Nov. 1, 1894, and Nov. 3, 1894; *Report of the Commission Upon the Election Laws of the Hawaiian Kingdom to the Legislature of 1888*, p. 5; HAA for 1890, p. 106, and 1891, pp. 54–57; *Report of the General Superintendent of the Census, 1890*, p. 38; Frank Godfrey, comp. and pub., *Godfrey's Ready Reference to Voting Districts and Precincts in the Republic, and Directory of Registered Voters for 1894* (pp. 117–119) and 1897 (pp. 68–69); *Evening Bulletin*, Sept. 30, 1897.
- ²⁰ Unpublished memorandum from Robert C. Schmitt, Hawaii State Department of Planning and Economic Development, to Hawaii State research personnel and others, “Intercensal Population Estimates for the Hawaiian Islands, Island of Oahu, and City of Honolulu, 1850–1900” (October 20, 1970).
- ²¹ Robert C. Schmitt, *Demographic Statistics of Hawaii: 1778–1965* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1968), pp. 73, 75.