

To vote, or not to vote

Published in the Honolulu *Advertiser*, August 29, 2006, p. A6 under the headline, "To have influence, know the policymakers" and not the title given above

Jim Dator

The only sensible thing to do in an election is not to vote. Of all the ways to have a positive impact on policy-making, voting is very near the bottom of the list. Much better ways, given our present system, are to be able to influence the decisions of whoever holds office--and not necessarily elective office since the actions or inactions of people who administer the law is what really matters. Moreover, we currently have a president who is quite willing to sign anything Congress passes and then simply ignore it. This is bound to inspire state governors to do likewise.

The way to influence policy is either to know policy-makers and administrators personally (it helps to be related to them) and/or to give them money. So in our present political system, especially in Hawaii, effective policy influence is best gained on the basis of some kind of a personal and/or financial relation with policy makers and policy administrators.

Now don't get me wrong. I am not necessarily a sensible man. I do vote. I have not missed a primary or general election since I was first able to vote. I follow politics avidly (well, I am a "political scientist" after all!). But I vote only out of a sense of civic engagement. Voting is a politically meaningless but spiritually fulfilling act of social solidarity. You meet more diverse people standing in line to vote than in most other lines one can stand in, with the possible exception the unemployment line.

But I don't for a moment think my vote counts a thing in terms of what the effective public policy of my county, state, or nation (especially nation!) might be.

For that, I try to know who is in elected office, who is administering laws, and especially who is making judicial decisions, since ultimately, in our system, "law is what the judges say it is."

Since I am a relatively poor university professor, I don't have much money to offer any one, but, since I am a university professor, I am

somehow privileged to offer them a lot of free advice, some of which, surprisingly enough, they follow.

Hawaii being a small place where a lot of people know each other (and a lot more don't know anyone), a lot of people prefer to talk story with the people they know and see if policy can be affected that way. And for those people in the know, it works. For the rest, they can either vote or give up.

I am not saying I approve of this system, but it is the one we have, and so if you want to influence policy, while it does no great harm if you vote, it is much better that you get to know people in power (regardless of who they are and how they got there) personally. And if you can pay them something on the side, so much the better.

Our system was designed to work this way. The US federal system was specifically created by our Founding Fathers to prevent democracy ("democracy" being a system where each citizen has an equal chance with every other citizen to effect policy").

The US federal government is extremely indirect and not democratic in any way. You cannot vote directly for president or any judge, or to amend the constitution. All you can do is vote for someone who then might vote for someone you might like. And, because of what is known in the trade as the "single-member district system", you have to choose ONE person from among many tens of thousands of very different people living in an electoral district to "represent" you. But how can one person really "re-present" so much diversity? They can't. So, in contrast with the US, most countries of the world have a "multi-member district system" (with 3, 5, 7, 9, sometimes scores of people elected from a single electoral district) greatly increasing the chance that someone like you in age, gender, race, religion, political ideology, sexual preference, or whatever it is that is important to you is available for you to vote for AND has a chance of winning. In a single member district system one person is supposed to represent EVERYONE, and that clearly is not possible. So he represents the people and interests that really matter to him.

So one big improvement (among many others) in the current system would be to eliminate the single member district system and adopt the multi-member district system instead (which Hawaii once upon a time sort of had, until the US Supreme Court declared unconstitutional). Hence even making that kind of change locally would require

amending the US constitution--and that is extremely difficult to do and your personal role in the process is utterly miniscule.

Another very good (but still pretty tepid) idea is to do away with single-member offices like president, governor, and mayor. Prof. Fred Riggs of the University of Hawaii has very convincingly shown that with the exception of the US, ALL nations as of 1987 that adopted what he calls the "presidentialist" system with a single person as the Executive-in-Chief end up with a military dictatorship. "Only" one third of the nations that have a parliamentary system (where the chief executive is elected from and by the legislature and can be removed by the legislature) do so. There can be no doubt that the American-style system gives FAR too much power to one person (and that the current one person wants even MORE power). It would be better to adopt the parliamentary system at all levels instead of what we have now, and add the multi-member district system as well.

There have been suggestions that Hawaii adopt things like initiative, referendum, and recall that some states and cities have. There is merit in discussing this, but unless something far better than any existing system is adopted here, it probably will be worse than what we have now. Of course there is something better, which has been used experimentally here in Hawaii, developed by Ted Becker, former UH Professor, and Christa Slaton, a PhD graduate of UH, called "Televote". This would achieve many of the aims of initiative and referendum far more effectively.

And there is also excellent evidence presented by Lyn Carson and Brian Martin in *Random Selection in Politics* that choosing public officials by lot (as we do juries and the military draft) can be highly effective and much, much fairer and more representative than the present system.

However, Ted, Christa, Jan Huston, along with myself and many others have demonstrated that direct electronic deliberative democracy (and administration and adjudication) is possible, preferable, AND very popular.

In the meantime, while you are working on achieving these and other necessary reforms, the sensible thing is not to vote--unless you want to show you are a loyal team player, and there is great merit in that.