

United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
Oversight Hearing
Voting Matters in Native Communities
October 27, 2021, 2:30pm EDT

Aloha Chair Brian Schatz, Vice Chair Lisa Murkowski, and Committee members,

My name is Na‘alehu Anthony and I come from Ka‘a‘awa on the island of O‘ahu. Mahalo for the opportunity to provide testimony on “Voting Matters in Native Communities.” The stakes are high across the country and, while there are numerous examples in the continental 48 that require your thoughtful consideration, my testimony is offered to highlight the unique perspectives that we face as Native Hawaiians in our ancestral lands.

He Ali‘i ka ‘Āina; he Kauwā ke Kanaka: the Land is the Chief and we are its servants. This ‘ōlelo no‘eau comes to us from our ancestors. We have been caretakers for this place we call Hawai‘i for more than a thousand years and over that time the responsibilities that we have taken left an undeniable imprint on the trajectory of this place, and an essential connection that should not be severed.

And yet, over the last 200 years, we’ve shared the common story with other native peoples testifying today - of cultural and physical genocide. With our lands and people no longer cared for by a Hawaiian governing entity and instead assimilated into the US mainstream, our voice in the democratic process has dwindled. But it is clear that the ability to vote and engage in government is critical to the continuity of the responsibility we have to this place as Native Hawaiians.

I fear that without our engagement in voting, and therefore standing with a voice of authority in government, the worldview that persisted here will no longer be the dominant one of this place. The future story of Hawai‘i with Native Hawaiians in it will be in jeopardy if we can no longer see ourselves in the reflection of that mo‘olelo, that story.

There is an insidious belief in the politics of Hawai‘i - Hawaiians simply don’t vote. It comes up again and again in conversations about engaging the Hawaiian population during each new voting cycle. “Why talk to them? Hawaiians don’t vote.” I have heard it many times. And we don’t actually know the truth to that statement, because our political organizers lack quality data to help us truly understand voting habits and sentiment toward electoral politics amongst our Native Hawaiian community. The possibility of holding Hawaiian-only elections disappeared with the 1999 ruling in [Rice v. Cayetano](#), which also took away our ability to understand who amongst our majority-mixed-race Hawaiian community vote with their Hawaiian identity in mind. Our grassroots organizations lack the research budgets necessary to better understand who of those community members vote or do not vote, and therefore how we might be able to activate and inspire them. We would deeply appreciate the help of this committee to improve our access to data that will help inform and empower our community.

But anecdotally, it's easy to extrapolate why Hawaiian voters may not see the effort of voting as worth their time. Underrepresented in local, statewide and national politics, Hawaiian interests - like those of many other native peoples - have been marginalized, ignored or actively opposed time and time again. So, one might ask, if voting changes nothing for us, why bother?

The threshold for "why bother" is high, not only due to lack of faith in government, but also because of the extraordinary social and economic pressures our community members are under. We live in a place where virtually everything is imported. We have even become accustomed to shipping most of our food in, even though these islands fed close to one million people before the point of Western contact. We have some of the highest costs for everything here - from milk and bread, to utilities like electricity.

One of the most troubling benchmarks is the median cost of a single-family home: [now more than one million dollars](#) on the island where I live, O'ahu. The economists tell us that the qualifying income for that [\\$1.05M](#) median home would be just about \$140,000, while the median household income on our island is [\\$102,100](#). Though economic data for Native Hawaiian households is not as readily available as we'd like, data from the census bureau indicates the median household income for Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders nation-wide was [just under \\$67,000](#). **Nationally, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders make only half the money they'd need to afford a house on O'ahu.**

That statistic alone threatens the ability for Native Hawaiians to vote in Hawai'i, and the income figures quoted above are pre-pandemic, not yet reflecting the outsized economic burden COVID-19 has had in our community. Far too many of us have fallen through the cracks. We need to put food on the table, make it to our third job on time, see that our children are cared for, and political engagement just simply may not make it to the priority list. And increasingly more and more of us find it easier to pick up and leave for other states rather than slip deeper and deeper into debt in an attempt to remain in our ancestral home.

This phenomenon has become even more acute with the pandemic as Hawai'i became the lifeboat for the extremely wealthy seeking the relative safety of the islands and our low COVID rates. Houses are still being bought sight unseen with cash from those who can now "work remotely." Put simply, we are being forced to leave due to the high costs required to persist here.

These economic pressures decrease our ability as Native Hawaiians to effectuate change here for two reasons: first, there are simply fewer of us left to vote in Hawai'i elections. And those of us who remain are under increasing pressure to just make it by every day, disillusioned by a system that continues to fail this community, and with little faith in government to follow through with meaningful change in response to their voters' mandates.

Before the 2020 election, Hawai'i saw two decades of voter turnout with percentages in the 30's and 40's: some of the lowest turnout in the United States. That figure alone should cause

concern for this committee. Individuals and communities who lack faith in and engagement with the established political systems seek other avenues to make their voices heard, as our community has with increasing visibility and effect in recent years. A healthy democracy requires representation, and we as Native Hawaiians need our perspectives weighed and counted, so that we may and once again take on the kuleana - responsibility - for this place we call home.