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Will voting by mail become standard? Hawaii lawmakers considering bill that would make it the norm

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By **JEFF HANSEL** Hawaii Tribune-Herald

A state House member is seeking input about legislation that would make vote-by-mail standard protocol in Hawaii.

Already, nearly half of people who vote in the state do so by mail.

"This bill would change the way we vote in Hawaii in an attempt to increase voter participation and reduce costs," Rep. Chris Todd, D-Hilo, wrote in a Facebook post. "HB 1401 would mean every registered voter receives a ballot in the mail and mails it back in — this process is already available by request, but this bill would make it the norm."

The bill passed third reading and House conferees were appointed to iron out wrinkles.

Voters could still cast ballots in person if they prefer. But long lines at polling stations would presumably become a thing of the past. Each eligible voter would be mailed a ballot prior to an election and asked to mail it back.

During a telephone interview, Todd said he thinks the bill has the necessary safeguards to increase voter turnout while preventing fraud. For example, voter signatures will be verified.

The legislative description for House Bill 1401 says a limited number of polling stations, called "voter service centers," would stay open to accommodate people with special needs, offer same-day registration, accept ballots being dropped off in person and allow people who prefer to vote in person to do so.

The bill, if passed, will take effect in the 2020 election cycle. But the measure specifically notes it "allows any election to be conducted by mail prior to the 2020 primary election, in whole or in part, as determined by the chief

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election officer or county clerk."

"We think it will save the state money," said Ann S. Shaver, president of the League of Women Voters of Hawaii. "But the League of Women Voters is interested in this because it's going to increase our voter turnout."

Voter turnout in Hawaii has been abysmal — the state came in last in 2016, with just 4 of every 10 eligible voters (43 percent) casting a ballot — the lowest rate in the country by far, according to the US Elections Project. The next-worst state for voter turnout, West Virginia, saw nearly 51 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot. In the top state, Minnesota, 74.8 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot in 2016.

HB1401 received support from county clerks and agencies such as the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, whose support is based on cutting costs, the need to serve disenfranchised voters specifically and hopes of increased voter participation generally.

Opposition centered on concerns about voter fraud and the possibility a family member will force someone to vote a certain way, or that friends will encourage group voting in which anonymity is lost.

Oregon, Washington and Colorado are three states where vote-by-mail now exists.

In 2016, the US Elections Project says, "all three vote-by-mail states were in the top 15 for turnout."

"People need to vote. People need to be able to express their opinions," said Erica Johnson, vice president of the League of Women Voters of Hawaii Island.

Email Jeff Hansel at jhansel@hawaiitribune-herald.com.

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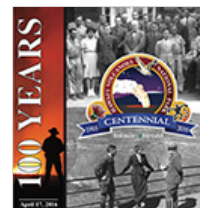
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