

Vote-by-mail in Massachusetts emerging as latest pandemic legislative issue

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Two state lawmakers have unveiled a bill that would reshape the 2020 elections to permit voting by mail for all statewide races and implement significant other changes to voting procedures in Massachusetts in years to come.

The legislation (SD 2912 / HD 5026), filed by Sen. Becca Rausch and Rep. Adrian Madaro, would send every registered voter a ballot by mail with a prepaid return envelope for both the Sept. 1 primary election and the Nov. 3 general election. For the primary, enrolled voters would automatically receive their party's ballot, while independent voters – who comprise a majority of the electorate – would need to request a specific party ballot at least 35 days before Sept. 1 and could do so online.

Secretary of State William Galvin had flagged concerns Monday with vote-by-mail as a concept because of uncertainty about how election officials would know which primary ballot to send, since that's a choice made by voters.

"We're facing a global pandemic that makes traditional in-person voting seriously concerning if not downright dangerous, so we must proactively pursue alternative voting methods," Rausch said in a press release. Said Madaro: "Mail voting already works in Massachusetts; we process thousands of mail-in absentee ballots every election with no issue."

Polling places would not be shut down under Rausch and Madaro's bill, and voters could still cast ballots in person

if they prefer. The legislation requires the state to provide poll workers with personal protective equipment if the coronavirus pandemic still poses a risk by late summer and in the fall.

Massachusetts would pay the costs of vote-by-mail and to maintain a digital central voter registry, partially using federal funds. The bill also would permanently declare the November Election Day as a legal holiday. Senate Majority Leader Cynthia Creem also filed an early voting by mail bill, although hers requires voters to proactively request ballots and does not include Election Day holiday language.