

Bill would protect Trump, ban Iowa ballot drop boxes

Democrats argue proposals make it harder to vote

By Tom Barton,

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DES MOINES — Iowa voters would no longer be able to return absentee ballots in drop boxes under legislation that also would make it harder to challenge Donald Trump’s eligibility to appear on the 2024 general election ballot.

House Republicans on Thursday advanced out of committee House Study Bill 697 that makes changes to state elections law that would limit challenges to federal candidates’ placement on the ballot, create an earlier deadline for absentee ballots to

be received by local elections officials, ban absentee ballot drop boxes, and ban ranked choice voting, among other changes.

A companion bill also advanced in the Iowa Senate.

Democrats vehemently opposed the bill, arguing it would make it harder for certain Iowans to cast a ballot. Republicans said the bill aims to maintain the highest level of election integrity in Iowa.

“This will make it easier to vote, not harder. It gives you more time to vote,” said Rep. Bobby Kaufmann, R-Wilton,

Elections/ Bill would limit ballot challenges

who chaired the subcommittee on the bill.

Representatives for county auditors, the League of Women Voters and AARP Iowa oppose the bill, saying it would make it more difficult for older Iowans and people with disabilities to return their ballots.

They also said it has become a constant struggle to educate Iowans about new voting rules and deadlines.

Lawmakers in recent years have shortened Iowa’s early voting period and stripped auditors of much of their discretion in running elections in their counties, including restricting their ability to establish satellite in-person early voting sites and mail absentee ballot request forms.

Under the bill, absentee ballots would have to be received by the county auditor by the close of business on the day before Election Day to be counted. Currently, ballots can be received until the end of the day on Election Day.

Auditors would be able to begin mailing out absentee ballots two days earlier to compensate for the earlier deadline. That would give Iowa voters an additional day to mail back absentee ballots. In-person early voting still would begin 20 days in advance of an election.

Democrats proposed amendments to make voting easier and more accessible — including automatic voter registration, expanding early voting to 45 days, allowing county auditors to begin counting absentee ballots earlier, making it harder to remove people from voter rolls, expanding use of ballot drop boxes and allowing counties discretion to establish satellite voting locations — which Republican members of the committee rejected. “Democrats are legislating to put people over politics. We want as many Iowans involved in the voting process as possible,” Zabner told reporters after the meeting. “We want people to have access to their fundamental rights. And Republicans are legislating for one man, Donald Trump. They want to make it harder for Iowans to vote.”

Kaufmann, who worked as a senior adviser for Trump’s presidential campaign in Iowa, dismissed the assertion, calling claims of suppression “nonsense” that have “been proven wrong over and over and over again.”

TRUMP ‘NONSENSE’

The bill would allow candidates for Congress and the presidency to appear on Iowa’s ballot even if they have been convicted of a felony.

Candidates for federal offices could be challenged only on U.S. constitutional requirements on the candidate’s

The bill also would require absentee voters to include their driver's license or voter identification numbers when returning their ballots. Current law only requires voters to provide those numbers when they submit a written request for a ballot.

It would set new requirements for absentee ballot envelopes, which the Iowa State Association of County Auditors says would require counties to incur major costs by buying all new envelopes.

Kaufmann, speaking to reporters, said absentee ballot drop boxes are no longer needed with the end of the COVID-19 public health emergency. COVID-19 severely disrupted elections in 2020. State voting systems were overwhelmed by long lines, an influx of absentee ballot requests, leading to the use of drop boxes.

"We no longer are in a COVID atmosphere. And there are already blue drop boxes in every single city and every single county in the entire state," Kaufmann said, referring to U.S. Postal Service mailboxes.

Voting rights activists and county election officials, however, note mail delivery may be delayed and take several days, whereas a drop box lets voters know for a fact their absentee ballot has been received.

"You have 21 days to vote," Kaufmann said. "That's plenty of time."

DEMOCRATS COUNTER

Rep. Adam Zabner, D-Iowa City, said the new restrictions on absentee voting could prevent thousands of Iowans from having their ballots counted.

He said 13,883 Iowans during the 2022 general election returned their ballots via absentee ballot drop boxes that are secured and monitored 24/7. And 3,000 Iowans returned absentee ballots on Election Day.

And about 150 ballots that would have been valid under previous Iowa law were not counted due to new restrictions on absentee voting enacted in 2021, he said.

"It is a lie to say that elections have been stolen in this country in recent years," Zabner said during the committee meeting. "And the truth is, we have plenty of integrity in our system. This bill is about keeping the right to vote away from certain Iowans."

age, residency, citizenship and whether their nominating papers meet all the legal requirements.

That would prohibit Iowabased ballot challenges such as the one in Colorado, where that state's Supreme Court decided Trump should not be on the Republican primary ballot. Trump faces 91 felony charges in four criminal cases around the country. And he has faced challenges to his candidacy under Section 3 of the U.S. Constitution's 14th Amendment that bars officials from holding office again if they "have engaged in insurrection or rebellion" against the United States.

Iowans, however, still could challenge Trump's eligibility in court.

Kaufmann, speaking to reporters after the committee meeting, said ballot access should be determined by the people, not activists on either side.

"These laws, in my opinion, make Iowa the strongest election integrity state in the country," he said.

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Emily Robert of Cedar Rapids hands her sealed absentee ballot to temporary Linn County employee Pam Swales to be scanned before putting it in a ballot drop box Oct. 29, 2020, in the early voting area at Lindale Mall in Cedar Rapids. A bill moving through the Iowa Legislature would get rid of drop boxes and require that absentee ballots be returned by mail or in-person. (The Gazette)



Rep. Bobby Kaufmann R-Wilton



Rep. Adam Zabner D-Iowa City

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