

Assembly votes to send Evers bill creating restrictions, felonies regarding absentee ballots

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The Assembly voted today to send a bill to Gov. Tony Evers' desk that would require indefinitely confined voters to apply for absentee ballots annually.

Indefinitely confined voters can currently receive automatic absentee ballots indefinitely. State law defines an indefinitely confined voter as a person "confined because of age, physical illness or infirmity or is disabled for an indefinite period." But the bill, concurred in 60-38, would remove indefinitely confined voters who applied for that status between March 2020 and November 2020 from the list and require them to reapply.

The bill would also end a decade-long exemption to providing proof of voter ID for indefinitely confined voters. Those without identification would have to submit a sworn witness statement affirming their identity.

The bill creates felony penalties for providing a witness statement instead of a voter ID when one is available, falsely confirming an indefinitely confined voter's identity and making false statements to qualify as an indefinitely confined voter.

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Republicans say the bill will protect elections against voter fraud, but Dems say it's voter suppression.

"Republicans are pushing a narrative that absentee voting is a privilege," said Rep. Mark Spreitzer, D-Beloit.

Rep. Rick Gundrum, R-Slinger, said the bill is "about transparency in our election

system” and accused Dems of “fear-mongering.”

The bill would also place new limits on all absentee voting.

The bill would require all absentee voters to include their ID each time they apply for a ballot. Currently, voters are only required to provide ID verification the first time they vote absentee.

Under the bill, absentee voters would only be able to request automatic absentee ballots for a primary and its associated election, rather than for every election occurring during that calendar. And if a voter does not return their primary ballot, they may not receive an absentee ballot for the associated election. It would also require that absentee ballot applications be different documents from absentee ballot envelopes, which are currently treated as ballot request forms.

The bill would also prohibit the Wisconsin Elections Commission and municipal clerks from sending unsolicited absentee ballot applications to all eligible voters. Issuing an absentee ballot without receiving a completed WEC absentee application form would be a felony under the bill.

“We should not be adding hurdles that make it more burdensome to vote,” said Rep. Gary Hebl, D-Sun Prairie. “Thank god the governor will veto these deplorable bills.”