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## Bill passed to make voting by mail easier in N.J.

By Cynthia Henry

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By fall's election, New Jersey residents will be able to vote more easily by mail, under a bill passed recently by the state legislature.

Gov. Corzine is expected to sign the measure, which eliminates the term *absentee ballot* and the confusion surrounding it.

The bill, which passed both houses May 21, lets any voter request a mail ballot for a single election, the rest of a calendar year - or for all future elections, whichever they prefer. The law would take effect July 1.

"As New Jersey tries to get more people to exert their voice in government, we must make it easier for voters to vote on their own terms, rather than try to squeeze something else into their hectic workday," Sen. Raymond Lesniak (D., Union), a bill sponsor, said in a statement.

In other states, including Pennsylvania, voters have to provide a reason, such as illness or travel on Election Day, to receive an absentee mail ballot.

In 2005, New Jersey went to "no excuse needed" absentee balloting, but multiple categories, deadlines, and rules remained, and voters had to reapply each election. The law, for example, distinguished between civilian and military ballots.

The new law "really does simplify things," said Assemblyman Jack Connors (D., Burlington), another sponsor. "It will bring more of our citizens out to participate."

New Jersey didn't go as far as states such as Oregon and Washington, which vote almost entirely by mail.

Even so, offering a "permanent" mail option will likely boost New Jersey's turnout, especially in the typically low-interest school board or municipal elections, said Paul Gronke, a political science professor at Reed College in Portland, Ore.

"If that ballot arrives in the mailbox, they'll fill it out," said Gronke, a mail-balloting expert.

More than 285,000 voters applied for absentee ballots for New Jersey's general election last November - a state record. Overall turnout was 3,910,220, or 73 percent of registered voters.

About 50 percent of Western voters now cast ballots by mail, Gronke said, while many Southeastern states offer early in-person voting. Northeastern states cling to traditional Election Day machine voting, he said, although New Jersey leads the region's exploration of alternative voting methods.

Drawbacks to mail voting include the loss of poll-booth privacy as ballots are debated around kitchen tables, Gronke said.

And candidates or parties could unduly influence small groups of vulnerable citizens, such as nursing-home residents or migrant workers. Fraud is rare, however, Gronke said.

"It's a system with beauty marks and warts," he said.

Safeguards in New Jersey's new mail system include requirements that county clerks closely screen applications, verify signatures, and prohibit mailings to voters deemed inactive, bill sponsors said.

"While we want to give people as many options as possible to exercise their right to vote, we cannot do so at the cost of the integrity of the election," bill sponsor Sen. Steve Sweeney (D., Gloucester, Salem) said in a statement.

The Office of Legislative Services estimated the new law would cost counties and the state about the same to administer as absentee voting - unless mail-in voting became wildly popular. An OLS sample of eight counties for administering absentee ballots in all 2007 elections and the 2008 presidential primary found the cost ranging from \$3,058 in Warren County to \$16,022 in Ocean County.

"Making it easier to vote by mail is a step in the right direction, but . . . there is still more work to be done to improve voter confidence at the polls, including making improvements to the voter registration process, improving poll worker training and performance, and systematically recording, tracking, and addressing voter complaints and problems," Anne Ruach Nicolas, executive director of League of Women Voters of New Jersey, said last week.

The league and American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey issued similar recommendations in a May 15 report, "Making Every Vote Count: A Review of the 2008 Elections in New Jersey," based on an analysis of more than 700 voter complaints.

Reviewing the report, Secretary of State Nina Mitchell Wells affirmed her "faith . . . in New Jersey's voting process on every level," but conceded that "under such historic and unprecedented circumstances, there were some issues and concerns that we can improve upon in the future and we will work diligently to do so."

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