

The Florida Senate
BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Committee on Ethics and Elections

BILL: SB 90

INTRODUCER: Senator Baxley

SUBJECT: Vote-by-mail Ballots

DATE: February 15, 2021

REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	<u>Biehl</u>	<u>Roberts</u>	<u>EE</u>	<u>Pre-meeting</u>
2.	_____	_____	<u>GO</u>	_____
3.	_____	_____	<u>RC</u>	_____

I. Summary:

Senate Bill 90 makes the following changes related to vote-by-mail ballots:

- Reduces the number of elections for which one request for a vote-by-mail ballot is sufficient to all elections held within a calendar year of the request; and
- Moves up the starting time for canvassing vote-by-mail ballots from 22 days before an election to 35-40 days before an election, thereby codifying a portion of Governor Ron DeSantis' Executive Order 20-149.

The bill takes effect July 1, 2021.

II. Present Situation:

Schedule of Elections

A general election is held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November of every even-numbered year – this means that a general election is held every two years.¹ A primary election is held 11 weeks before each general election.² The dates for the next primary election and general election are:

- Primary election – August 23, 2022; and
- General election – November 8, 2022.

¹ Article VI, s. 5(a), FLA. CONST.; and s. 100.031, F.S. A general election is held to choose a successor to each elective federal, state, county, and district officer whose term will expire before the next general election.

² Section 100.061, F.S. A primary election is held to determine party nominees to be on the ballot in the general election to fill each federal, state, county, or district office.

Vote-by-Mail Generally

Florida law allows a voter to request a vote-by-mail (VBM) ballot, which the voter can either return via mail or drop off at an authorized site in lieu of having to vote at the polls during early voting or on Election Day. A voter does not need to provide a reason for a VBM ballot request. A request for a VBM ballot can be made in person or in writing.³

Effective Period for Vote-by-Mail Ballot Requests

Current law provides that one request from a voter for a VBM ballot is sufficient to receive a VBM ballot for all elections through the end of the calendar year of the second ensuing regularly scheduled general election,⁴ unless the voter indicates at the time of the request the elections for which he or she would like to receive a VBM ballot.⁵ A request for a VBM ballot may be considered canceled when any first-class mail sent by the supervisor of elections (supervisor) to the voter is returned as undeliverable.⁶

The law formerly provided that one request from a voter for a VBM ballot was sufficient for all elections held within a calendar year of the request. The Legislature in 2007 expanded the length of time for which one request was sufficient in order to mirror what is allowed under federal law for certain military and overseas voters.^{7,8}

Starting Date for Vote-by-Mail Canvassing Period

Florida law allows county canvassing boards⁹ to begin canvassing VBM ballots starting at 7 a.m. on the 22nd day before an election.¹⁰ In 2019, the Legislature extended this starting period from 15 days before an election to 22 days before an election.¹¹

In 2020, at the request of the supervisors and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Governor Ron DeSantis issued an executive order suspending the 22-day timeframe and allowing each county canvassing board to begin canvassing VBM ballots as soon as the Logic and Accuracy (L&A) testing of the machines/equipment was completed.¹² The L&A tests are designed to

³ Section 101.62(1)(a), F.S.

⁴ For example, under the current law, if a voter makes a general request for a VBM ballot in February 2021, then he or she would receive VBM ballots for all elections through the end of 2024, because the next two general elections will be held in November 2022 and November 2024, respectively.

⁵ Section 101.62(1)(a), F.S.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Chapter 2007-30, s. 30, L.O.F.

⁸ The Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voter Act, passed by Congress in 1986, provides absentee voting requirements for federal offices for voters who are United States uniformed services members on active duty, Merchant Marine members, spouses or dependents thereof, or United States citizens residing outside of the United States.

⁹ A county canvassing board is composed of the supervisor of elections; a county court judge, who acts as chair; and the chair of the board of county commissioners (s. 102.141(1), F.S.).

¹⁰ Section 101.68(2)(a), F.S.

¹¹ Chapter 2019-162, s. 19, L.O.F.

¹² Office of the Governor, Executive Order No. 20-149 (June 17, 2020), available at https://www.flgov.com/wp-content/uploads/orders/2020/EO_20-149.pdf, last accessed February 4, 2021.

ensure the integrity and accuracy of the tabulators and voting machines.¹³ Because the timing of these L&A tests is tied to the beginning of early voting in each county,¹⁴ which varies from 10 to 15 days before an election,¹⁵ in 2020 counties were generally able to start their VBM canvass 35 to 40 days before the primary election and general election, which is 13 to 18 days earlier than the 22 days that the current statute provides.

The media has credited the canvassing of VBM ballots prior to Election Day as one of the reasons Florida's 2020 general election went so smoothly and why results were available so much more quickly than for states, such as Pennsylvania, that had to wait until Election Day to start counting.¹⁶

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

Effective Period for Vote-by-Mail Ballot Requests

The bill reduces the number of elections for which one request for a VBM ballot is sufficient to all elections held within a calendar year of the date of the request.¹⁷ This returns the law to its pre-2007 form.

The bill specifically provides that if a voter has already submitted a VBM ballot request that would, under the current law, be effective through the end of the calendar year of the second ensuing regularly scheduled general election, he or she must resubmit a VBM request after the effective date of the bill in order to receive VBM ballots for the 2022 primary election and general election.

Starting Date for Vote-by-Mail Canvassing Period

The bill codifies Section 1 of Executive Order of the Governor No. 20-149, providing that county canvassing boards may begin canvassing VBM ballots as soon as the county finishes L&A testing. In practice, this means that:

- Counties that begin early voting as soon as the statutes allow (15 days before an election) may begin VBM canvassing as early as the 40th day before an election instead of the 22nd day before an election, nearly doubling the available time; and
- Counties that wait until 10 days before an election to begin early voting can start VBM canvassing as early as the 35th day before an election instead of the 22nd day before an election, still providing an additional 13 days of counting.

¹³ Section 101.5612(2), F.S.

¹⁴ Each supervisor must complete an L&A test on any day up to 25 days before the start of early voting (*id.*).

¹⁵ *Id.*; see also, s. 101.657(1)(d), F.S. (counties *may* start early voting 15 days before an election, but *must* start no later than 10 days before).

¹⁶ See e.g., Tampa Bay News 10 (WTSP), *Florida Counted Votes Quickly in the 2020 Election – What Happened in the Other States?* (Nov. 18, 2020), available at <https://www.wtsp.com/article/news/politics/florida-2020-election-counting/67-33b47308-7571-4c70-8afc-cfa8b872bcca>, last accessed February 4, 2021.

¹⁷ For example, under the proposed changes, if a voter makes a request for a VBM ballot on August 1, 2021, then he or she would receive VBM ballots for all elections held through July 31, 2022, which is the last day of one calendar year from the date of the request.

This change will facilitate a more orderly election administration process and quicker reporting of results.

The bill takes effect July 1, 2021.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

Not applicable. Bills that affect state or local elections are exempt from Art. VII, s. 18 of the Florida Constitution.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. State Tax or Fee Increases:

None.

E. Other Constitutional Issues:

None.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

If the reduced time period for which one VBM ballot request is sufficient results in a higher total number of requests, supervisors are likely to incur additional processing costs.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:

None.

VIII. Statutes Affected:

This bill substantially amends the following sections of the Florida Statutes: 101.62 and 101.68.

IX. Additional Information:

A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Changes:

(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

None.

B. Amendments:

None.

This Senate Bill Analysis does not reflect the intent or official position of the bill's introducer or the Florida Senate.
