

EDITORIAL

Register to Vote— by Mail

If you, a resident of Massachusetts and a citizen of the United States of America, had wanted to participate in the 1984 presidential election last fall but were not registered to vote, you might have been obliged to stand in line for up to four hours to become eligible to exercise your right to cast your ballot. If a bill now before our state Legislature passes, standing in line to register to vote will no longer be necessary. You'll be able to do it by mail.

House bill 4760 provides for simplified and uniform voter registration, increases penalties for making false affidavits, and repeals certain requirements for registration. Under this bill, any eligible person could register to vote by signing an affidavit in the presence of a witness, who countersigns it, and returning the affidavit to the local election office. It could be hand-delivered or mailed.

Passage of this bill would eliminate costly and time-consuming out-of-office and other special and evening registration sessions. mail registration will increase voter registration among young people, non-white, poor, and highly-mobile segments of our population. All these are currently under-represented in the electorate. Disabled and elderly citizens

find it inconvenient to register to vote under present laws.

To safeguard against fraudulent registration, the bill provides that the affidavit would be returned to the proper local election office; further, it requires removal from the voting list of the names of new voters who did not register in person and who do not appear in current street lists of residents if a non-forwardable mail notice to them is returned undelivered. The bill also doubles the maximum criminal penalties for fraud to a fine of \$2,000 or imprisonment for two years.

Twenty-two other states and the District of Columbia have adopted similar legislation and have realized costs reductions, increased voter registration, and none of them has reported any fraud problem. This bill has the strong support of Gov. Dukakis, 77 legislators, and is being co-sponsored by 25 organizations including the League of Woman Voters, Masspirg, Massachusetts Fair Share, the Legislative Council of Older Americans, and other public interest groups.

Obstacles to register to vote should be removed so that any eligible citizen may participate in an election. There are one million persons in Massachusetts who would be eligible to vote but who are not registered. This bill should pass.