

Two bills to significantly affect voting in Utah

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SALT LAKE CITY — The House Government Operations Committee approved two bills Wednesday that may drastically affect voting in Utah.

HB35, sponsored by Rep. Marc Roberts, R-Salem, would create a pilot program that will make it an option to implement rank-choice and approval forms of voting in certain nonpartisan municipal elections.

In rank-choice voting, the voter ranks multiple candidates for one seat from most favorable to least favorable with a numbering system.

Approval voting differs from rank-choice voting in that voters mark the candidates they approve and leave the others blank.

Rep. Brad Daw, R-Orem, was the only dissenting vote in the committee to HB35, saying he had never heard of those methods of voting before and needed more time to learn about them.

HB141, sponsored by Rep. John Westwood, R-Cedar City, would allow election officers to reduce the early voting period to a minimum of two days from the 14 days currently required. Westwood justified his bill by citing the costs concerns of paying polling staff for a full 14 days when there may be no voters at all, especially in rural Utah. Eighteen of Utah's 29 counties currently don't offer any early voting at all, he said.

Westwood suggested that those counties may be willing to open elections for early voting if they didn't have to open for a full 14 days.

Marina Lowe, a representative for the American Civil Liberties Union, spoke against the bill, saying cost is not an issue and that changing early voting would create confusion and discourage voter turnout.

"We want to encourage any and all opportunities to vote," Lowe said.

Rep. Patrice Arent, D-Millcreek, and Rep. Rebecca Chavez-Houck, D-Salt Lake City, were the dissenting votes on the committee.

"Early voting is an important part of the democratic process," Chavez-Houck said. "Not all people have the ability to vote on Election Day, and it allows those, such as the elderly and the disabled, to more easily cast their ballots."

Both bills will go to the full House for consideration.