Statement on An Act Relative to Voting Options in Response to COVID-19 (Bill H.4778)

Bill H.4778 would make several critical changes to voting in Massachusetts aimed at ensuring that all residents are able to vote safely in the midst of the current COVID-19 pandemic. These changes include allowing all voters the opportunity to vote by mail, requiring that all voters be mailed an absentee ballot with prepaid postage at least 19 days before the election, and creating an online portal through which voters can request or check the status of absentee ballots.

The Graduate Student Council (GSC) of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which represents MIT’s 6,900 graduate students, fully supports any measure that protects voter rights or increases voting accessibility to eligible voters. The GSC, therefore, strongly supports the legislation proposed in bill HD.5075, An Act Ensuring Safe and Participatory 2020 State Elections Despite the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The emergence of COVID-19 poses unprecedented risks to public gatherings, including in-person voting. The unpredictability of this disease has already resulted in extensions on emergency orders prohibiting such gatherings\(^1\) and such guidance on avoiding public contact may continue for the foreseeable future, beyond the September 1, 2020 state primaries and November 3, 2020 biennial state elections. In-person voting thus lies in opposition to these orders aimed at keeping us safe and mitigating the spread of the disease. Changes to the way we vote are therefore critical to ensure everyone is able to participate in our democracy without putting their health at risk.

In the most recent Wisconsin spring election, over 1.1 million absentee ballots were requested and returned comprising around 70% of the vote\(^2\), a significant increase compared to only 10% of vote in the 2016 primaries and less than 28% in the 2016 general election\(^3\), demonstrating a clear need for accessibility to absentee ballots given the risks voters are facing. A 2013 study in Washington state found moving to all-mail elections resulted in a 2 to 4 percentage point increase in participation\(^4\). Furthermore, a 2016 study in Utah where 21 of 29 counties conducted vote-by-mail found a 5-7 point increase in turnout\(^5\). Both studies found the highest increase in lower-participating registrants.

Utah followed Oregon, Colorado, and Washington to become the 4th state conducting all elections by mail, a group which was joined by Hawaii in 2019. Concerns for election security with mail-in voting has been allayed by an infinitesimally small rate of fraud observed in Oregon which has been doing all mail-in voting since 2000, a rate of around 1 per 10,000,000\(^6\). By allowing all registered voters in Massachusetts to vote absentee, HD.5075 would help protect the ability to vote during this pandemic.

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1. Latest guidance on COVID-19 prevention and treatment extending emergency orders prohibiting gatherings
2. Absentee Ballot Report and Results for “April 7, 2020 Spring Election and Presidential Preference Primary” by the Wisconsin Elections Commission
3. Wisconsin 2016 spring election presidential primary report and general election voter registration and absentee report
4. Identifying the Effects of All-mail elections on turn-out
5. https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/ef45f5_fcc651c4d4f1456b8340bb4e2cc0ca12.pdf
H.4778 also requires ballots with guaranteed postage to be automatically mailed to every registered voters who registered to vote before July 15th. The GSC strongly supports this provision, as it would both help increase voter turnout by making it easier to vote as well as ensure equitable access to voting rights given voters may not be able to readily access stamps, financially or physically. H.4778 also includes provisions to allow voters to request absentee ballots electronically. These measures will be particularly important for many graduate students who have been forced to move during the pandemic and help ensure that they can still receive their absentee ballot.

The GSC, therefore, urges swift passage of legislation enabling all eligible voters in the Commonwealth to cast their ballots for the September 1, 2020 state primaries and November 3, 2020 biennial state elections, as put forth in H.4778.

Prepared by the External Affairs Board on behalf of the MIT Graduate Student Council. June 2020.