Members of Congress can vote from home for now—but not by using tech

Enlarge / The Capitol is big, but not big enough to give every member of Congress a whole lot of breathing room.

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Congress has a problem. Well, many problems, if you ask almost any American, but specifically—right now in the middle of a pandemic—it has a problem with physical space for social distancing.

The House of Representatives has 435 members, and while the House Chamber is big enough to seat them all, it's definitely not large enough for every one of them to have a 6-foot radius of empty space around them. So Congress is looking to do what tens of millions of us are now currently doing: working remotely. But first, representatives have to agree on a new rule that lets them do so.

To that end, the House on Friday adopted Resolution 965, which will permit remote voting in the House for the first time since our legislative branch took form in 1789.

Your elected representative still can't use Skype or Zoom to cast a vote from their couch, though. Instead, while a public health emergency "due to a novel coronavirus" is in effect, members of Congress can designate proxies to vote in their

place. Basically, members have to issue signed, written letters—which can be emailed—saying who they authorize to vote in their stead, and what, very specifically, their proxy should do in their name. Those proxies can then go into the chamber and do all the voting as instructed.

The resolution allows for the speaker of the House, currently Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), to designate a 45-day period for the proxy rule to apply. If the public health emergency is still in effect when that period expires, the speaker may renew it for another 45 days. If the declared public health emergency expires during the 45-day window, then the proxy period also terminates early.

That said, however, the resolution does also call for a study of what it would take to do actual remote voting. Specifically, it instructs the Committee on House Administration to "study the feasibility of using technology to conduct remote voting in the House" and to tell the rest of the House when it determines that "operable and secure technology exists to conduct remote voting in the House."

Everything is partisan for Congress in 2020, and working from home in a pandemic is apparently no exception. All 217 votes in favor of the resolution came from Democratic members, and all Republican representatives voted against.

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