

Minnesota Has Reduced Its Reliance on Election-Day Registration and Can Do So Again



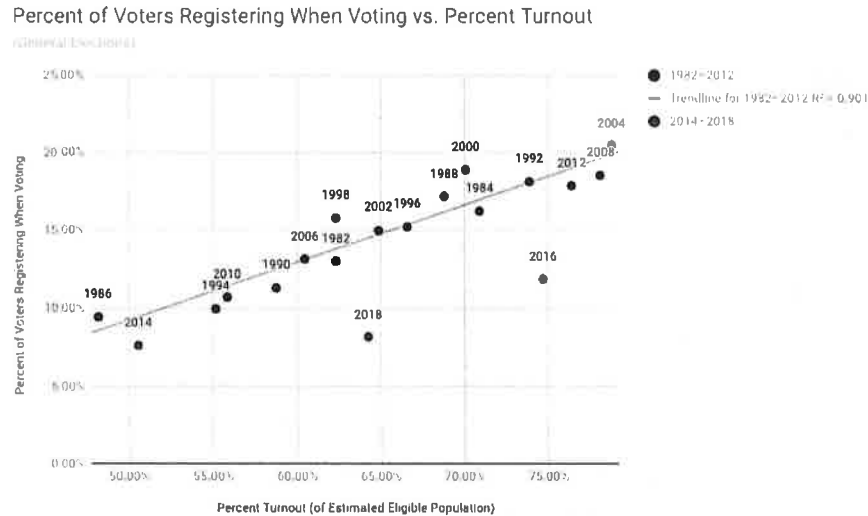
Max Hailperin [Follow](#)

Nov 28, 2018 · 3 min read

Since 1974, Minnesota voters have had the option of registering at the time when they vote. Commonly called Election-Day Registration, this actually encompasses not only registration on Election Day itself but also registration submitted along with absentee ballots. In 2014, the Legislature made it easier for voters to register in advance and to keep their registration up to date. These changes substantially reduced the use of Election-Day Registration without reducing turnout. The Legislature could repeat this achievement with additional improvements to advance registration, described subsequently. This would further reduce reliance on Election-Day Registration and thereby ease the administrative burden on election officials, speed voting, and make errors less likely.

To appreciate how much leverage the Legislature has, it's helpful to start by examining how effective the 2014 innovations were. This requires comparing the utilization of Election Day Registration after that point with the baseline of what was previously normal. One apparent obstacle to establishing a baseline is that the percentage of voters using Election Day Registration was quite variable, ranging from less than 10% to more than 20%. However, most of this variability is accounted for by a very simple, predictable pattern, as shown in the graph below, which has a dot for each general election since 1982. (Data before that year is not directly comparable for several reasons, including the adoption of a comprehensive new election law in 1981.) The vertical position of the dot indicates what fraction of voters registered when voting, whereas the horizontal position indicates the overall turnout. The three red dots are for the years after the 2014 innovations. Setting these aside, the rest of the data (1982–2012) shows that low-turnout elections tend more toward voters registered in advance whereas high-turnout years tend to include a greater proportion of same-day registrants. (The association with turnout

extends across both presidential and non-presidential years. The presidential years are those with turnout greater than 65%.) The years after 2014—those in red—show notably low use of Election-Day Registration.



Data from Secretary of State's Website; Underlying Eligible Estimates from US Elections Project

To summarize the experience gained since 2014, Minnesota has seen that Election-Day Registration can remain just as available, yet be used considerably less, if changes are made elsewhere in the registration law so as to encourage advance registration.

Opportunity still exists for substantial further progress of the same sort. Indeed, there is no reason why the percentage of Election-Day registrants couldn't be consistently in the single digits, even in high-turnout presidential election years. The Office of Legislative Auditor (OLA) reported that 72% of Election-Day registrants in 2016 proved their residence using a current Minnesota driver's license, learner's permit, state identification card, or receipt for the same. Admittedly, some of these may have been dated within the 20 days prior to election, when advance registration is not allowed. However, aside from those, any Election-Day Registration using a document from Driver and Vehicle Services (DVS) could have been avoided if DVS had preemptively submitted a corresponding voter registration application.

Existing law allows DVS to submit voter-registration applications. However, two obstacles reduce the frequency with which this ability is utilized:

1. The registrant needs to explicitly check a box requesting DVS submit the application, an opt-in mechanism. Experience in other states shows a greater participation rate if the default is reversed with an opt-out choice.
2. Only those who will be 18 by the time of the next election can register through this mechanism or any other. This obstacle could be removed by accepting applications from 16 and 17 year olds, simply placing them in a special pre-registered status until they are old enough to be actually registered.

If the 2019 Minnesota Legislature were to move voter registration to an opt-out basis and allow the pre-registration of 16 and 17 year olds, it would again be substantially reducing the use of Election-Day Registration without any reduction in its availability, just as in 2014. In terms of the graph shown previously, new dots would be added even lower than those shown in red.

