

# Utah election reform law aims to remove barriers to voting, boost turnout

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SALT LAKE CITY — A bipartisan law the Utah Legislature passed this year — parts of it eight years in the making — gives voters a wider array of options to cast their ballots on or before Election Day.

"My argument has always been it's a citizen's right to vote," said Rep. Rebecca Chavez-Houck, D-Salt Lake City. "If you decide on Election Day at 3 o'clock in the afternoon that the spirit strikes you and you want to go vote but you forgot to register, you should be able to do that."



Under HB218, unregistered voters who are otherwise eligible to vote may cast a provisional ballot on Election Day or during the early voting period. The provisional ballot serves as a voter registration form.

The bill also enhances Utah's opt-in voter registration process while renewing or applying for a driver's license or state identification card to make it more clear. It also allows residents to choose party affiliation, request a mail-in ballot and keep their voter registration record private. Counties that conduct elections by mail-in ballot must also provide a certain number of polling places for in-person voting. The legislation also gives counties more flexibility for conducting early voting.

"There's a little bit of something for everybody in this bill," Chavez-Houck said.

Weber County Clerk/Auditor Ricky Hatch said the legislation benefits county election officials and voters.

The Utah Driver License Division now automatically submits address changes to counties, reducing the number of vote-by-mail ballots that are returned undeliverable and saving money on postage, he said. About 16 percent of the population moves between elections, Hatch said. The changes help voters because they now must make a choice to register to vote or not on the driver's license application before being able to complete it.

"This is a big win for voters because it sort of forces them to answer the question, 'Do you want to be registered to vote?'" Hatch said.

A lot of times people thought they had checked the box at the driver's license division but found during the election that they were not registered. County clerks told lawmakers during the legislative session that 1 in 3 eligible voters didn't check the box to update their registration in 2016.

Chavez-Houck, who pushed Election Day registration since former Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr.'s Commission on Strengthening Democracy recommended it in 2009, said her goal was always to remove barriers to voting.

Republican lawmakers haven't shared her philosophy for making voting easier. Many, more so in the House than the Senate, see it as a privilege, not a right, and believe voters should have to make some effort to participate in elections.

Rep. Steve Handy, R-Layton, ran into opposition to his bill that would have automatically registered someone to vote when they sign up for a driver's license.

"Some more on the conservative right saw it more as a you're making it too easy for people to register to vote. They have to walk on fire or walk through glass to register to vote. I absolutely do not get this," he said.

Sen. Deidre Henderson, R-Spanish Fork, ran a similar bill that sailed through Senate but stalled in the House.

GOP House leadership eventually rolled the three lawmakers' proposals into one bill that went through six iterations, or "three weeks of real pain" as Handy put it, before reaching agreement.

"You've got a bill there that actually finds a unique, Utah-based solution to some of these outstanding items that really was designed to provide access to the ballot for everybody, transparency in the process and increase not only voter registration but, hopefully, increase turnout as well," said House Majority Assistant Whip John Knotwell, R-Herriman.

Keeping the opt-in voter registration process and making the affirmation clear and transparent on the driver's license application was key for some Republicans who ultimately supported HB218, as was maintaining in-person voting.

Knotwell said lawmakers who had problems with some of the individual proposals worked through the issues to come up with a "good, solid" election reform bill.

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"You've got the people that were struggling with vote-by-mail, are supportive of this. People that were struggling with automatic voter registration are supportive of this. Folks that were struggling with Election Day voter registration are supportive now," he said.

While it stopped short of automatic voter registration through driver's license renewals, Hatch said he expects the legislation would lead to greater participation.

"I do think it will increase the number of voters on the rolls," he said. "The big question is how much."