

You can now register to vote on election day in Utah. Are counties prepared for the change?

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ST. GEORGE — New changes to election rules in Utah this year will allow people to register to vote on election day if they missed the registration deadline.

Eligible voters will be allowed to cast a provisional ballot on election day if they weren't registered to vote before, according to the [modifications to Utah election law](#) passed during the 2018 legislative session. Sponsored by state Sen. Deidre Henderson, R-Salt Lake City, and Rep. Rebecca Chavez-Houck, D-Salt Lake City, the bill received bipartisan support and was signed into law by the governor in March.

Washington County has moved to a [vote-by-mail this year](#), but there will be a few polling locations available in the community. Every polling location will have the means to help someone register to vote on election day, said Melanie Abplanalp, Washington County election coordinator.

There will also be a few polling locations where people can register to vote on election day in Iron County, which also conducts vote-by-mail election.

The deadline to receive a ballot in the mail was Oct. 9, so eligible voters who didn't already register may register to vote at a polling location by the Oct. 30 deadline or take advantage of the new election-day registration rule.

Election Day is Nov. 6.

After the changes to allow election-day registration, members of the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah expressed concern about whether all county clerks in Utah were ready to implement these changes. They conducted a phone survey where they called county clerks in eight counties across Utah, including Washington County, to find out if they were prepared for the modifications.

Washington County officials passed the test. They were "very well-prepared" to handle election-day registration and had information about it on their website, said Jason Stevenson, strategic communications manager for the ACLU of Utah. Not all counties surveyed by the ACLU were as prepared.

"We found that many counties did not have information about election-day registration on their websites and had registration information that made it seem like if you missed the deadlines, then you couldn't vote in the election," he said, "when in fact you can register to vote and cast a ballot on election day."

Out of the eight counties in Utah surveyed by the ACLU, six of them did not have information about election-day registration on their website. Three of the county clerks could not confirm that poll workers were trained on election-day registration this year, even though they will be the ones responsible for implementing the new voting option, according to a press release from the ACLU.

"The possibility that potential voters might be turned away from their local polling locations because of uninformed poll workers is of grave concern," reads the ACLU press release.

Stevenson said he didn't want to make a "bad list" to identify counties that weren't prepared to administer election-day registration. Instead, he wanted the results of the survey to send a message to all county officials in Utah to take a look on their election policies to make sure they were ready for the change.

The ACLU took the results of the survey to the office of Lt. Gov. Spencer Cox and the Utah State Elections Office to make sure every county has the correct information on election-day registration.

“We asked the lieutenant governor’s office to check in with county clerks to make sure they were doing all they can to prepare and promote election-day registration,” Stevenson said.

Iron County was not part of the ACLU’s survey and a representative from the Iron County Clerk’s office did not immediately respond to St. George News’ request for comment.

Why election-day registration is important

When people were turned away from voting at polling locations because they weren’t registered, it was a problem that led politicians like Chavez-Houck to push for change. Utah was ranked 39th out of 50 states in the nation for voter turnout in the 2016 election. Voter turnout in Utah could be improved with election-day registration, Chavez-Houck said.

“While campaigning door-to-door, I met many people who had recently moved to the district and missed the deadline to register to vote,” she said. “Their lives were busy and complex, and our election system was failing them. I fought for election-day registration because I believed there had to be a fail-safe for voters who thought they had done everything right, but for some reason or another were not registered to vote.”

In order to vote with a provisional ballot on election day, people will need to come to a polling location with proof of identity and residency within the county they’re voting in, Abplanalp said.

“It would be nice if people were registered before (the deadline), but we of course know there are a lot of reasons why they couldn’t – somebody moved in or has an address change or something like that,” Abplanalp said.

More information on elections in Utah or information on where to find polling locations if eligible voters need to register on election day can be found at vote.utah.gov.