Why Republicans Should Embrace Permanent Absentee Voting

Op-ed by Andrew Cilek, executive director of the Minnesota Voters Alliance – Originally published at Alpha News

“Republicans cannot afford to sit on the sidelines while tens of thousands of potential voters are receiving ballots weeks before Election Day.” |

Republicans face a simple choice: adapt to the new voting landscape or risk falling further behind.

Minnesota’s recently adopted permanent absentee voting program has the potential to significantly reshape future elections. Regardless of how Republicans felt about the legislation when it was passed back in 2023, the reality is that the law is now in effect and is likely here to stay for the foreseeable future.

The question is no longer whether Republicans support permanent absentee voting. The question is whether they will use it. Those who refuse to adapt will be handing a major electoral advantage to the DFL Party.

What is permanent absentee voting?

Permanent absentee voting allows an eligible voter to sign up once and automatically receive a ballot before every election.

Most importantly, signing up does not require voting by mail.

A voter on the permanent absentee list can still vote early in person or cast a ballot at their polling place on Election Day.

Why this matters

The political impact of permanent absentee voting could be enormous.

Research from the Vote America Research Center in 2024 found that turnout increased dramatically among voters who were automatically sent absentee ballots.

The study showed that in a recent election in Arizona, turnout among low-propensity voters increased by more than 33 percentage points, with substantial gains among moderate and high-propensity voters as well.

The lesson is clear: when voting becomes easier, more people participate.

If one party embraces permanent absentee voting while the other resists it, the party that adapts will gain a significant turnout advantage.

Republicans cannot afford to sit on the sidelines while tens of thousands of potential voters are receiving ballots weeks before Election Day.

The reality Republicans must face

Many Republicans have legitimate concerns about election security. Those concerns should not be dismissed.

But refusing to use an available voting method does nothing to improve election integrity. It simply reduces Republican participation while the other side continues to use every available tool to maximize turnout.

Politics is often compared to a football game. If the rules change, a successful team adjusts its strategy. It doesn't refuse to take the field.

The same principle applies here.

Permanent absentee voting is now part of Minnesota's election system. Republicans can either use it effectively or allow Democrats to win more elections.

Evidence suggests Democrats are already moving faster

According to some election observers and local officials, absentee voting has historically been used at much higher rates by Democrats than Republicans. Reports also suggest that 9 out of 10 absentee voters are choosing the new permanent option.

If that trend continues, the gap will grow even wider over the next several election cycles.

It is entirely possible that more than one million Minnesota voters could be enrolled in permanent absentee voting before the 2028 presidential election and 750,000 of those could very likely be Democrat voters.

Every Republican who chooses not to participate increases the likelihood that the voter receiving and returning a ballot is a Democrat.

In close elections, that matters — a lot!

There is no downside

Signing up for permanent absentee voting provides several advantages:

- Your ballot arrives weeks before Election Day.
- You have time to research candidates and ballot issues.
- You receive a built-in reminder that an election is approaching.
- You are less likely to miss local elections, school board races, and special elections.
- You can still vote in person if you prefer.

The decision does not change how you vote. It simply increases the likelihood that you vote.

Republicans have successfully adapted before

Minnesota's political contribution refund program offers an important lesson.

When the program was created, Democrats initially benefited more than Republicans. But once Republican candidates and organizations learned how to use the program effectively, they not only caught up but, in many cases, gained an advantage.

The same thing can happen with permanent absentee voting.

The party that adapts fastest will benefit most.

Elections must be won before policies can be changed

Some Republicans may still dislike permanent absentee voting. That is their right.

But winning elections requires political parties to deal with reality as it exists today, not as they wish it to be.

No election law can be changed or reformed until those who care about election integrity get elected in the first place.

The voters who consistently receive ballots, remember elections, and return their votes are the voters who shape the future.

If Republicans are serious about winning elections, including in off-years, they should not surrender that advantage to the other side.