

Estimating Voter Turnout in the August 10, 2010 Minnesota Primary

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David Schultz, Professor
School of Business
Hamline University
570 Asbury Street
Suite 308
St. Paul, Minnesota 55104
651.523.2858
dschultz@hamline.edu

SUMMARY

Two big questions surround the move from a September to an August 10, primary in Minnesota:

- 1) What impact will it have on voter turnout?
- 2) Who will be harmed or helped by the new date?

This study aims to answer both questions. It concludes:

- * The impact on overall turnout of moving the primary debate will be slight, decreasing turnout by approximately **2%**, although it may affect who does vote on that date. The analysis here suggests a **12% turnout** for the August 10, primary, which translates into a total turnout of approximately **381,366 voters**.
- * Approximately **228,820 individuals** will vote in the **2010 DFL gubernatorial primary**.
- * To **win the DFL gubernatorial primary**, a candidate will need to between 76,197 and 114,410 votes, with the most likely winning number being between **90,000-95,000 votes**.
- * In general candidates with **better name recognition** and **the support of organized interests** should benefit from the August primary.
- * There is **little evidence that increased spending by candidates will significantly increase voter turnout**. However, candidate spending might produce modest changes in turnout and it could provide information that changes voter preferences.

All statistical data in this study regarding voter turnout were obtained from the Secretary of States' Offices in Minnesota, Florida, and the State of Washington. All inferences and arguments here reflect the opinions of the author and not of any of these offices or Hamline University.

I. IMPACT OF CHANGING PRIMARY DATES

What do we know about the impact on voter turnout on changing primary dates? The simple answer is not a lot. There are some studies that suggest that moving primaries from after Labor Day (fall) to early June while school is still in session has little impact on turnout. Some studies that have looked at shifting the date of presidential primaries, but the results regarding turnout are also inconclusive since variables such whether there was a contested election or where in time the primary came in comparison to those in other states can affect turnout. But there are no studies

examining the impact of changing primary dates for statewide races from after Labor Day to summer, such as will be the case with Minnesota this year.

A. IS SUMMER A FACTOR?

There are several arguments to suggest that a switch to a summer or August primary in Minnesota may depress voter turnout. One claim is that in the summer with school out and people on vacation, few are thinking about voting and elections. Remembering in the August that there is an election on a Tuesday might get lost in people thinking about cabins, walleyes, and the sun. Additionally, Minnesota has a tradition of using the State Fair to kick off the real campaign season where voters can eyeball and talk to the candidates in person. Lacking this voting cue from the State Fair, voters might not be attuned to the August primary, especially this first time in 2010. Finally, many college students are relocating during early August and they may be distracted and thus not vote.

B. Evidence from other States

Evidence from two other states—Florida and Washington—offers limited clues about the impact of shifting primary dates. In recent years both states moved their September primaries to August.

Florida in 2006 held its gubernatorial primary in early September, yielding a 19.6% turnout. In 2007 it changed the date of this non-presidential primary, moving it by one week to the last week of August. In 2008, with no governor’s race, there was 17.7% turnout. This 1.9% drop could have been due to the lack of a statewide gubernatorial race, a statistical fluke, or some other factor. But an almost 2% drop is not much.

Table I: Florida September and August Primary Turnouts

Primary Date	percent turnout	Gubernatorial Election?
Florida September, 2006	19.60%	Yes
Florida August, 2008	17.70%	No
Difference	-1.90%	

In 2004 and 2006 the State of Washington still held its primaries in September. In 2005 the primary date was moved to mid-August. In 2004 and 2008 there were governor’s races and the turnout was 45.2% and 42.6% respectively—a 2.6% decrease in turnout..

Table II: Washington State September and August Primary Turnouts (Gubernatorial Years)

Primary Date	percent turnout	Gubernatorial Election?
Washington September, 2004	45.20%	Yes
Washington August, 2008	42.60%	Yes
Difference	-2.60%	

Yet Washington has run two primaries in August in years that did not have a gubernatorial election. In 2002, the last date where there was a September primary without a statewide gubernatorial race, turnout was 34.2%. In 2006 lacking a statewide governor’s race, turnout was 38.8%—an increase of 4.6%. Yet in 2009, another year without a gubernatorial election, turnout was 31.04%—a decrease of 3.16%.

Table III: Washington State September and August Primary Turnouts (Non-Gubernatorial Years)

Primary Date	percent turnout	Gubernatorial Election?
Washington September, 2002	34.20%	No
Washington August, 2006	38.80%	No
Washington August, 2009	31.04%	No
Difference 02/06	4.60%	
Difference 02/09	-3.16%	

Many variables are at play to explain the turnout differences in Washington, especially the 2006 increase. These include a 2006 U.S. Senate race and an energized Democratic Party that year. But two of the three comparisons contrasting August and September primaries suggest a decrease in voter turnout.

Of the four elections comparing August and September primaries in Florida and Washington, three demonstrated turnout decreases of 1.9%, 2.6%, and 3.16%. This was an average decrease of 2.55%. There was also one race showing an increase of 4.6%. If the four are averaged together, the change in turnout is -.77%—less than a 1 percent decrease.

Given the limited data from these two states, it may be impossible to make any definitive statements about the impact of a shift to an August primary, especially given the increase in the 2006 Washington turnout. But the 2006 race may not be a good comparison given the U.S. Senate race and engaged Democratic Party activism that year that offset the shift in primary date. Given those two factors, the 2006 results should be discounted somewhat.

C. Estimating Minnesota’s August 2010 Primary Turnout

Given the trends in these two states, the decrease in voter turnout by shifting the primary date is slight, amounting to about 2.5%. What does this mean for Minnesota?

The assumption will be made that the new date, at least this year, will yield not quite a 2% decrease in turnout. The rationale for this 2% is based on three factors. First absent a state fair to cue voters, turnout will decrease. Second, day of election voting in Minnesota generally facilitates primary turnout. But many voters, such as college students, will be moving or resettling at this time and may not be attentive to voting and therefore may not show up at the polls to vote. Three, whatever same

decrease the shift in a primary date will produce, it will be slightly offset by candidate and party spending that will stimulate some turnout. Overall, a combining the shift in primary date with political spending will produce a decrease in voter turnout of about 2%.

II. MINNESOTA’S PRIMARY EXPERIENCES IN RECENT HISTORY

A. ESTIMATING AUGUST 2010 TURNOUT NUMBERS

The trends for primary turnout in Minnesota since 1982 have been generally downward. Table IV lists that turnout.

Table IV: Minnesota Primary Turnout: 1982-2006 (Gubernatorial Years)

Year	Turnout	Contested?
1982	31.08%	Yes
1986	25.69%	Yes
1990	24.28%	Yes
1994	27.17%	Yes
1998	19.79%	Yes
2002	14.93%	Yes
2006	13.80%	Yes

From 1982 to the present the trend has almost been linear and downward from a 31% turnout to barely 14%. Moreover, there were serious contests in either the Republican or DFL primaries in each of these years, with the latter having contests in all of the elections since 1982. These contests are important to note because these primary turnouts all reflect stimulation produced as a result of candidate competition and the perception that the race would be close. In general voter perception of a close contest encourages turnout.

Several factors might explain decline in primary attendance. One might be the weakening of general party identification in the state over a quarter of a century. Other factors might be declining trust in state government or changing demographics. But whatever the reason, turnout is down.

Given this downturn, the prediction is that the 2010 turnout will be 12%, almost 2% lower than the 2006 13.8% turnout. This prediction assumes approximately a 2% decrease in turnout due to the shift to an August primary date, but that shift may be offset slightly by the existence of a competitive DFL primary with the potential for lots of money being spent to encourage turnout, and with the active role of organized interests to stimulate turnout. The decrease in turnout also reflects a continuation of a trend in downward participation in primaries.

Overall, the prediction for turnout in the 2010 primary can be expressed as an equation:

$$T = \$ -D -P$$

Where:

T = August 10, turnout

\$ = Money spent by candidates, parties, and political organizations to encourage turnout

D = Change in primary date

P = Decrease in party attachment

What does this mean in terms of raw numbers? The total number of registered voters in Minnesota in 2010 is approximately 3,178, 050, according to the Secretary of State's Web site. This means that 12% of that number is 381, 366 voters. This is the estimated turnout for the August 2010 primary.

B. ESTIMATING THE DFL PRIMARY TURNOUT

The August DFL primary will face a contest among the convention-endorsed candidate Margaret Anderson-Kelliher and challengers Mark Dayton and Matt Entenza. How many DFLers will vote on August 10, and how many votes will be necessary to win the primary?

In 1998, 2002, and 2006, the percentages of voters in the primaries who voted DFL were 78%, 53%, and 62% respectively. All three of these elections were contested, with the 1998 one involving four challengers that included the four strong candidates of Skip Humphrey, Ted Mondale, Mark Dayton, and Doug Johnson. The competitiveness of this election (and the lack of a serious challenger to Norm Coleman) for the Republicans, along with the strong organizations of the four DFL candidates, perhaps explains the high percentage turnout in that party in 1998. Otherwise, there appears to be no real norm for what percentage turns out for the DFL in a primary except to say it is more than 50% of all primary voters.

A statistical average over these three elections is that 64% of those who turnout in primaries will vote DFL. Adjusting for the fact that there are three competitive candidates in the 2010 primary and not four, and because there may be less party identification to the DFL party than in years past (especially this year in a presumably anti-incumbent, anti-Democrat year), the assumption will be that 60% of those who vote in the August 10, primary will vote in the DFL gubernatorial primary. This means that the DFL turnout for governor will be 228, 820.

C. HOW MANY DFL VOTES TO WIN THE PRIMARY?

If approximately 228,830 individuals will vote in the DFL primary, how many votes will Anderson-Kelliher, Dayton, or Entenza need to win on August 10?

Scenario one assumes a candidate needs to win at least 50% of the votes to win. This means at least 114,410.

Scenario two assumes that the DFL field is very competitive, divided, and even. A winning candidate would need at least 33% of the votes to win. This means at least 76,197.

Scenario three assumes a somewhat competitive field but that one candidate will be weak in comparison to the other two. Here a winning candidate will need at least 40% of the votes to win. This means at least 91,528.

To win the DFL primary, the successful candidate should target between 76,000 to 115,000 votes to assure victory, with the most likely winning number being somewhere around 90,000-95,000 votes. This estimate of 90,000-95,000 votes assume one candidate will emerge as significantly stronger than the other two, winning slightly more than 40% of the vote.

D. Variables Affecting Turnout: Will Money Matter?

The last question is to ask if any other variables will affect turnout for the DFL in August? Specifically, some contend that money spent by self-financed candidates might affect turnout? However, at least three variables might have a potential impact—money, support of organized interests, and name recognition.

I. MONEY

Two of the candidates—Entenza and Dayton—have a significant capacity to self-finance their campaigns and raise far more money than the endorsed candidate Kelliher-Anderson. However, Dayton has suggested some limits on how much money he can self-finance, giving the money advantage to Entenza.

Will money increase or alter turnout? Political science research suggests that merely spending more money alone does not increase turnout. Instead one has to think how that money is spent. Some money needs to be spent on air wars or simply informing voters about the issues or the fact that a primary is taking place. But money also needs to be spent on ground wars—actually mobilizing voters with get out the vote campaigns (GOTV). GOTV and mobilization spending does increase turnout, and some air wars helps turnout. But in both cases the actual correlation between candidate spending and turnout is not strong. This suggests that a mere spending advantage does not necessarily translate over into increases in turnout.

But more spending could alter voter preferences and choices even if it does not significantly alter turnout.

II. ORGANIZED INTERESTS

A second issue that could affect turnout and who wins is the role that organized interests play in the primary. Presumably the candidate with better support from organized interests will do better in a primary. This is the case because the organized interests such as labor unions or interest groups will do a better job mobilizing its member to vote in the primary. If this is the case, then the candidate with the better connections to organized interests will prevail. Here, Anderson-Kelliher and Dayton seem to have the advantage.

III. NAME RECOGNITION

Finally, the third issue is initial name recognition. Generally candidates with higher name recognition (and a better ratio of positive versus negative ratings) do better than candidates without the same. As of this date, Dayton probably enjoys better name recognition compared to Anderson-Kelliher and Entenza.

III. CONCLUSION

The shift to an August primary in Minnesota will result in a slight decrease in voter turnout of approximately 2%. But this decrease in turnout is also accompanied by a long term downward trend in voting in primaries that goes back to the 1980s. Given these trends, the estimate is that approximately 12% of voters will participate in the August 10, gubernatorial primary, equally about 381,000 individuals.