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## Tom Vellenga and Erin Sapp: Reform our elections or prepare for more recounts

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### Reform our elections

### Or prepare for more recounts

If the Great Election Recount of 2008-09 has proven anything, it is that the very legitimacy of our democracy rests on the integrity of our voting system.

Gov. Tim Pawlenty had an opportunity to sign into law several crucial election improvements that would have eliminated many of the sources of error and confusion we've witnessed in the U.S. Senate election recount. Yet the governor chose on Thursday to veto House File 1053, which would have authorized a critical improvement in our voter registration system.

Modernizing and automating voter registration is crucial. A national survey last fall found that more election problems resulted from voter registration mistakes than from any other cause. "Registration issues were for 2008 what machine problems were for the 2000 election," the study's

author concluded.

We can do much better. Heartland Democracy has released a report, 21st Century Voter Registration, calling on Minnesota, Iowa and Wisconsin to adopt the highest and best system for voter registration -- a 21st-century system that employs automatic registration with high quality control.

Backed by Secretary of State Mark Ritchie, HF 1053 would have authorized the secretary's staff automatically to register eligible voters seeking to obtain or renew their driver's licenses. This step would mark one important stride toward a true 21st-century system of the kind already used with great success in Europe and Canada.

Automatic registration would greatly improve the accuracy of voter lists while saving costs. Ritchie's staff estimates a savings of at least \$1 million a year.

In his veto message, the governor wrote, "registering to vote should be a voluntary, intentional act," and he called for bipartisan support for any change to election law. The latter objection is self-fulfilling, as the governor and his GOP leaders in the Legislature could have chosen to support

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this innovation on its merits early on. Under the bill, voters could opt out of automatic registration by checking a box, making it a voluntary and intentional act. Moreover, our desire for erecting hurdles to voters contributes to an old-fashioned system that regularly produces clerical errors and is reliant upon an unnecessarily high budget to pay for all the time election administrators must spend to verify registration. Research shows that the old system depresses voter participation by 1 to 2 percent.

Voter registration reform is a classic "good government" response to the obvious problems in our election systems, to long lines at the polls and to unnecessarily high costs. Surely future legislators and governors will not wish to continue banging their heads against the wall of an antiquated electoral system. Minnesotans should let their legislators and gubernatorial candidates know they support this vital reform.

TOM VELLENGA AND Erin Sapp, Heartland Democracy.

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