

ELCAvotes

2016

Civic Participation and Voter Education Guide

A resource guide to encourage, empower and equip Lutherans for responsible civic engagement based on their faith values.

- ▶ The role of theology, call and faith in elections.
- ▶ Engaging in local action to guarantee the right to vote to all citizens.



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

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Disclaimer: The information provided in this guide is accurate to the best knowledge of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's (ELCA) Washington, D.C., Advocacy office as of March 2016. While we have done our best to provide you with current, non-partisan information regarding congregations and election law, no resource guide can substitute for checking with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), federal and state agencies administering election laws, and your attorney regarding the extent to which a congregation and its religious leaders can be involved in specific political activities.

A message from the Rev. Elizabeth Eaton,

presiding bishop of the ELCA

The ELCA is a church called by Jesus Christ to be a public witness to the love of God poured out for all. In our ELCA social statement, “The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective,” we affirm the importance of participation of all people in our society, including people of faith. This document, which guides our public speech and ethical actions, commits us to “work with and on behalf of the poor, the powerless, and those who suffer, using [this church’s] power and influence with political and economic decision-making bodies to develop and advocate policies that seek to advance justice, peace and the care of creation.”



When we pray to God to give us our daily bread, Luther reminds us this includes “everything that pertains to the regulation of our domestic and our civil or political affairs.” This church understands government as a means through which God works to preserve creation and build a more peaceful and just social order in a broken world. Christians are called to be stewards of our common life through serving as faithful and active citizens.

As church together we are launching the ELCAvotes initiative to educate, equip and encourage discipleship through participating together in the electoral process. Casting our ballots and serving our neighbor by ensuring that all voices are heard is one way in which we live out our affirmation of baptism to “serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus,” and “to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.”

We are church for the sake of the world. In 2013, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted a social policy resolution titled “Voting Rights to All Citizens.” This resolution calls on members, congregations and synods of the church to “promote public life worthy of the name” by speaking out as an advocate and engaging in local efforts such as voter registration and supporting legislation to guarantee the right to vote to all citizens. We live out our mutual responsibility for one another by guaranteeing our neighbor’s right to vote and participate freely and fully in society.

It is my hope that this guide will be a useful tool as you and your ministries wrestle with faithful responses to difficult issues in this election cycle and those to come. Remember that voting is a first step toward faithful civic participation; many more opportunities to use your voice with and on behalf of those in need are available at [ELCA.org/advocacy](https://www.elca.org/advocacy).

May the Holy Spirit guide you as you consider how to use the voice given to you by God and the vote given to you by this country.

God’s peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads “Elizabeth A. Eaton”. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Elizabeth A. Eaton
Presiding Bishop

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Called to be a public church

The role of theology, call and faith in elections.

- ▶ **This section can be used as a tool for conversation in your community about our role as U.S. citizens and as people of faith to engage in local efforts that seek to guarantee the right to vote to all citizens.**
- ▶ **How are we called to civic engagement as individuals and as a church? Here you will learn about the importance of nonpartisan civic engagement and the significance of faith in elections.**

How are we called to civic engagement through participation in the electoral process?

Voting is one of the most important ways Americans can be involved in our representative democracy. Through the simple act of casting an informed vote, we have the opportunity and responsibility to help make decisions that will affect our lives and the lives of our families for the next two to eight years. As communities of faith, we can provide opportunities for participation through voter education and registration, communal discernment on the issues and vigilance in ensuring the right to vote.

Why does the church engage in public life?

Scripture reveals God's presence in all realms of life, including political life. Lutheran theological tradition understands government as a means through which God works to restrain evil, preserve creation and build a more peaceful and just social order in a sinful world. As Lutherans, we do not endorse a particular form of government or strive for a Christian one. Instead we engage those who govern, participate in deliberation and decision-making and evaluate our government according to its ability to provide for the common good.

Graciously justified by faith, we are freed in Christ to live a "faith active in love" for God's world and our neighbors by seeking reconciliation, peace and justice, and caring for creation. The electoral process is one way we live out our affirmation of baptism to "serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus," and "to strive for justice and peace in all the earth." For the church, these efforts must be grounded in the Word of God, prayer, communal discernment and faithful decision-making that takes into account the well-being of our most vulnerable neighbors.

A civically engaged church can participate in its community by facilitating voter registration programs, getting people to the polls, encouraging poll watching and monitoring, instigating issue discussions, training in moral deliberation and providing holistic voter education opportunities. As citizens of the United States, we have the right, the privilege and the responsibility to be involved in the political process and to ensure that voting rights are upheld and promoted.

As a public church, we have a responsibility to step outside our comfort zones and challenge ourselves to address issues and ask questions that affect families, communities and neighbors throughout the world. We

do so with humility, aware that we do not have all the answers and actively seek God's guidance. We do so with conviction, knowing our voices are important and our faith perspectives are unique. As a church body, the ELCA boldly witnesses to important political, social and economic issues affecting local and global communities. This work grows out of our theological understanding of God at work in the world as articulated in the social statements of this church, which you can find at ELCA.org/socialstatements on the Web.

In 2013, the ELCA adopted a social policy resolution titled “Voting Rights to All Citizens.” This resolution calls on members, congregations and synods of the church to “promote public life worthy of the name” by speaking out as an advocate and engaging in local efforts, such as voter registration and supporting legislation to guarantee the right to vote to all citizens.

The importance of nonpartisan civic engagement

An important part of faithful civic engagement is abiding by the law: Any participation by churches in the electoral process must be strictly nonpartisan.

With this understood, it is still important to acknowledge that we have a remarkable opportunity to strengthen the public debate around the electoral process by allowing our faith to ground our political ideals. When we educate ourselves about the laws surrounding our participation in electoral affairs, there are many activities that we can conduct that are both demonstrations of our Christian faith and are extremely valuable to our community and our nation!

The simple act of casting your vote can have a powerful effect. Your vote means that your elected officials are accountable to you. As a result, by voting you become an advocate for all of the change or consistency that you want to see in this country. This is the beauty of our electoral system.

The significance of faith in elections

God is at work in our world! We have been so blessed by this loving God, we are drawn to be where God is, right in the middle of every-day decision making. Our faith is rooted in this relationship with God and with our neighbor.

Christ is present where there is suffering and pain. Our neighbors may be working but still unable to afford food, struggling to find quality childcare, unable to access clean water or are living in unsafe housing. We have been called to be engaged in public policy discussions and active in governmental affairs because these very needs of our neighbors are being addressed (or ignored) in this process. And we can receive great comfort in knowing that God is at work in the midst of sinful institutions every day, so we need to be there too!

Civic engagement takes many forms: talking with friends on the sidelines of your local soccer field as you shape public opinion, attending a school board meeting, sending an email to an elected official and many others. One unique vehicle God uses to be active in the world is the process of voting, a basic responsibility of all citizens. Bishop Wolfgang Hertz-Lane stated, “Voting is central to our faith because it is part of the prophetic voice of faith, for the sake of the world.” Voting is a process of naming our faith values, then acting on them through our vote.

Often we hear candidates who are running against an incumbent ask, “Are you better off now than you were four years ago?” This question must be expanded to also ask, “Is my neighbor better off?” Our faith invites a personal vote that also takes into account the well-being of our neighbors and God’s creation, not just our own.

During the 2013 Churchwide Assembly, the ELCA passed a resolution to address the grave issue of voter suppression. This decision affirmed that members, congregations and synods of this church be encouraged to promote a “public life worthy of the name” by speaking out as an advocate, engaging in local efforts, such as voter registration and supporting legislation to guarantee the right to vote for all citizens. The right to vote on an equal basis is a fundamental requirement for a just society.

Voting is a first step in faithful civic participation, and it is an opportunity to meet God at work in our world – an opportunity that you don’t want to miss. So read on, and learn how you and your congregation can become a public church. **The language “faith active in love” is taken from Galatians 5:6 *Bishop Wolfgang Hertz-Lane, was the chair of the Conference of Bishops Committee on Voting Rights. *The 2013 assembly resolution was called “A Social Policy Resolution Concerning the Guarantee of Voting Rights to All Citizens.” *The language “A public life worthy of the name” is taken from the ELCA social statement “Race, Ethnicity, and Culture,”*



We pray...

Almighty God, you have given us this good land as our heritage. Make us always remember your generosity and constantly do your will. Bless our land with honest industry, truthful education, and an honorable way of life. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion; from pride and arrogance, and from every evil course of action. Make us who came from many nations with many different languages a united people. Defend our liberties and give those whom we have entrusted with the authority of government the spirit of wisdom, that there might be justice and peace in our land. When times are prosperous, let our hearts be thankful; and, in troubled times, do not let our trust in you fail. We ask all this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (LBW Prayer 129)

How far have we come in guaranteeing the right to vote?

Lutherans have long been involved in the fight to protect voting rights in the United States. Today, the ELCA is guided by our social statement: “Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture,” as well as the 2013 ELCA Social Policy Resolution: “Voting Rights to All Citizens,” which directly calls on us to speak out as advocates and engage in local efforts such as voter registration and supporting legislation that guarantees the right to vote to all citizens. (See page 19 for more information and additional resources on voting rights and racial justice!)

Who is still left out of the process?

From a history of voter suppression from the Jim Crow era of the 19th to the 21st century to the current climate of restrictive voter laws, many people of color face barriers to their right to vote. We encourage conversation about why this matters to us as a church and what we can do about it.

“When we rebuild walls of hostility and live behind them – blaming others for the problem and looking to them for solutions – we ignore the role we ourselves play in the problem and also in the solution. When we confront racism and move toward fairness and justice in society, all of us benefit.”

ELCA social statement, “Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture”

How can we as a church promote dignity and respect, and honor all who reside in our communities?

As a church, we are committed to “a moral deliberation that deals openly with conflict and controversy.” Election season is, unfortunately, a time in which negative rhetoric aimed at belittling others and instigating fear is the norm. The church of Jesus Christ is uniquely equipped to foster and model civil dialogue, invite trust in the midst of differences, and lead healthy community conversations to discuss issues of the common good.



ELCA members join civil rights activists, faith leaders and elected officials in Alabama to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery civil rights march and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Voter education and participation guide

Engaging in local action to guarantee the right to vote to all citizens

- ▶ There are many ways to engage with your community and encourage voter participation, especially during an election year.
- ▶ Before you begin, make sure you know the rules about voter engagement by reading our summary of IRS guidelines below.
- ▶ Each state has its own rules and deadlines for voter registration, requesting and turning in absentee ballots, and voting on Election Day. Equip yourself with this information so you can help others participate in the electoral process.
- ▶ From registering new voters to holding candidate forums, this guide will walk you through when and how to take action.

IRS guidelines for congregations

Know the rules about voter engagement!

What constitutes nonpartisan electoral activity?

An important part of faithful civic engagement is abiding by the law. Any participation by congregations in activities related to the electoral process must be strictly nonpartisan and abide by IRS guidelines. Congregations and clergy must ensure that activities related to the electoral process are transparent, nonpartisan and legal.

According to the IRS, “all section 501(c)(3) organizations are absolutely prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for elective public office.”

Focus on activities that are intended to encourage people to participate in the electoral process. These can include, but are not limited to, nonpartisan voter registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns, sponsoring candidate forums, and becoming a polling location. Remember, voter education or registration activities conducted by the church are not permissible if they show evidence of a bias that: (a) Would favor one candidate over another, (b) Oppose a candidate in some manner, or (c) Have the perceived effect of favoring a candidate or group of candidates.

For more information and guidance on non-partisan electoral activity, visit our ELCA Advocacy Resources page: [ELCA.org/Resources/Advocacy](https://www.elca.org/Resources/Advocacy). To read about the prohibition on political campaign intervention, visit the IRS’ website: [irs.gov](https://www.irs.gov).

Election-year action timeline

Use this presidential election-year timeline to plan activities for your community.

	Important dates and deadlines	Action you can take!
Jan. – June	Primary season begins. Political parties hold primary elections throughout the country from January to July.	Hold Bible study and discussions in your community. Visit ELCA.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/ELCAVotes for Bible study guides and additional resources. Register new voters and update voter registration information for those who have recently moved. (page 8) Take action on Sept. 11 and Sept. 27. Hold forums with local and state candidates. (page 13) Candidate forums are a great way to engage with your community.
July	Major political parties hold national conventions. After parties hold their nominating conventions in a presidential election year, the general election begins.	
Aug. – Sept.	Sunday, Sept. 11, is “God’s work. Our hands.” Sunday! Tuesday, Sept. 27, is National Voter Registration Day.	
Oct.	Voter registration closes in many states. In many states, voter registration closes up to 30 days before Election Day. Make sure you know when your state’s voter registration closes.	Make sure new voters have registered and those who need to update their registration have done so before the deadline. (page 10)
	Deadline for requesting mail-in and absentee ballots. It is highly recommended that absentee ballots be requested 30 days before Election Day.	Help voters request mail-in or absentee ballots if they are unable to vote at the polls on Election Day. (page 15)
	Early voting begins in some states. Voting locations are sometimes available before Election Day for those who would like to vote early.	Encourage voters to learn about early voting centers in their area. (page 16) Find out if your county has early voting and then inform your community.
Nov.	Absentee and mail-in ballots are due. Most absentee ballots must be postmarked before Election Day and received by Election Day. We recommend sending your voted ballot as early as possible to ensure it is received.	Remind voters to mail their absentee ballots by the deadline. Learn more about these deadlines by visiting your state elections website. (page 15) Pray for our electoral process, all candidates who are running for office, and for good government.
	Election Day! (first Tuesday of the month)	Get out the vote! (page 17) Encourage your community to vote on Election Day.

Voter registration

Provide the resources for your community members to register to vote.

In this section you will learn how to:

- ▶ Find out your state's voter registration rules and deadlines.
- ▶ Engage with your community by making sure everyone has access to voter registration information.

What is voter registration?

There are many obstacles that keep people from voting, and lack of accurate information about voter registration is one of the biggest. Fortunately, it is not difficult or time consuming to connect eligible citizens with the resources they need to register to vote. By obtaining voter registration forms from your county elections office (and obtaining the necessary credentials in order to officially register voters in your community), you can help your community become more engaged.

The rules for registering new voters or updating existing voters' registration information differ depending on your country or state. By first informing yourself about the rules in your community, you can help equip others to register themselves or help register others. Whether you are helping to register a new citizen who does not know about the election process, or updating the registration information of a young adult who has moved to a new home, your support can make the difference between an eligible voter feeling empowered to participate or disengaging altogether because they feel their participation does not matter.

Why is it important to register your community members to vote?

In the last major congressional election in 2014, data released by the U.S. Census Bureau showed that:

66% of all eligible citizens are registered to vote.

55% of citizens with household incomes of less than \$14,999 are registered to vote.

78% of citizens with household incomes of greater than \$100,000 are registered to vote.

Statistically, African Americans, Latin Americans, single women and young citizens were disproportionately not registered.

Why is it important for a church to get involved in voter registration? For one, a friendly or familiar face can make a significant difference in someone's decision-making. Our churches are rooted in their neighborhoods and communities – they are a place of trust, inclusion, new beginnings and faith. Someone who feels excluded from the political process, whether they are traditionally skeptical of politicians or of unfamiliar campaign volunteers from across town, may be more receptive to take part in elections if welcomed by someone they know. As the ELCA, we are committed to making sure that our communities are accurately and well-represented in elections. Representation and inclusion are fundamental principles of a democracy and of our faith.

What's more, as churches engaged with the most marginalized members of our community, we have the

opportunity to touch the disenfranchised who many activists fail to reach. Being provided a voter registration form, whether from a congregation, a food bank, or some other service center, can empower a person to be civically engaged who might otherwise not be, whether that is because they do not have easy access to transportation, they do not have time available to figure out how to register on their own, or because they think their voice doesn't matter. Your encouragement can make a difference.

For many people who feel excluded from the political process, registering to vote can be an opportunity; the first step to feeling included. People who register to vote and turn out once are more likely to do it again in the future – civic involvement is an investment that, if fostered, can bloom and grow. The first step of registration can help plant a seed, which will make people more socially aware and willing to testify to their faith in public.

Learn your state's voter registration rules and deadlines

Alabama alabamavotes.gov	Illinois elections.il.gov	Montana sos.mt.gov/elections	Rhode Island sos.ri.gov/vic
Alaska elections.state.ak.us	Indiana in.gov/sos/elections	Nebraska sos.ne.gov/elec	South Carolina scvotes.org
Arizona arizona.vote	Iowa sos.state.ia.us	Nevada nvsos.gov/elections	South Dakota sdsos.gov
Arkansas sos.arkansas.gov	Kansas voteks.org	New Hampshire sos.nh.gov	Tennessee sos.tn.gov/elections
California registertovote.ca.gov	Kentucky elect.ky.gov	New Jersey njelections.org	Texas votetexas.gov
Colorado sos.state.co.us	Louisiana sos.la.gov	New Mexico sos.state.nm.us	Utah vote.utah.gov
Connecticut sots.state.ct.us	Maine maine.gov/sos/cec/elec	New York elections.ny.gov	Vermont sec.state.vt.us
Washington, D.C. dcboee.org	Maryland elections.state.md.us	North Carolina ncsbe.gov	Virginia elections.virginia.gov
Delaware ivote.de.gov	Massachusetts sec.state.ma.us/ele	North Dakota vip.sos.nd.gov	Washington sos.wa.gov/elections
Florida election.dos.state.fl.us	Michigan vote.michigan.gov	Ohio sos.state.oh.us	West Virginia sos.wv.gov
Georgia sos.state.ga.us	Minnesota mnvotes.sos.state.mn.us	Oklahoma ok.gov/elections	Wisconsin myvote.wi.gov
Hawaii hawaii.gov/elections	Mississippi sos.ms.gov	Oregon sos.state.or.us	Wyoming soswy.state.wy.us
Idaho idahovotes.gov	Missouri sos.mo.gov/elections	Pennsylvania votespa.com	Puerto Rico fvap.gov/puerto-rico

Register to vote online



It's easy to register yourself and encourage others to register to vote online. You can conveniently fill out, print and mail your registration form through online voter registration sites, such as Vote411.org. Encourage others to register by sharing an email with your friends, congregations, synods and leaders in your community. Be sure to include the specific registration deadline for your state.

Register voters in your community

Helping people register to vote online is a great start, but not everyone has access to the Internet. That is why conducting voter registration in your congregation, neighborhood and community is a great way to ensure everyone has the information they need to participate in the electoral process.

Keep in mind that every state has its own rules for registering voters. While some states allow you to simply pick up voter registration forms from your county elections office, others require that you be officially trained and registered as a “third-party registration agent” through your state secretary of state’s or county clerk’s office. Visit your secretary of state or election website to learn about these rules. (See page 9 for a list of relevant websites.)

There are several effective ways to engage with eligible voters in person.

Here are a few ideas:

- > **Set up a voter registration table at your church. (see below)**
- > **Remind your congregation to register to vote by including voter registration information for your county and state in your congregation’s weekly bulletin.**
- > **Provide voter registration information at food pantries and shelters.**
- > **Make sure your public assistance agencies are prepared to register voters.**

How to set up a voter registration drive

This guide describes voter registration in a congregation but can apply elsewhere, such as on your campus or in your neighborhood.

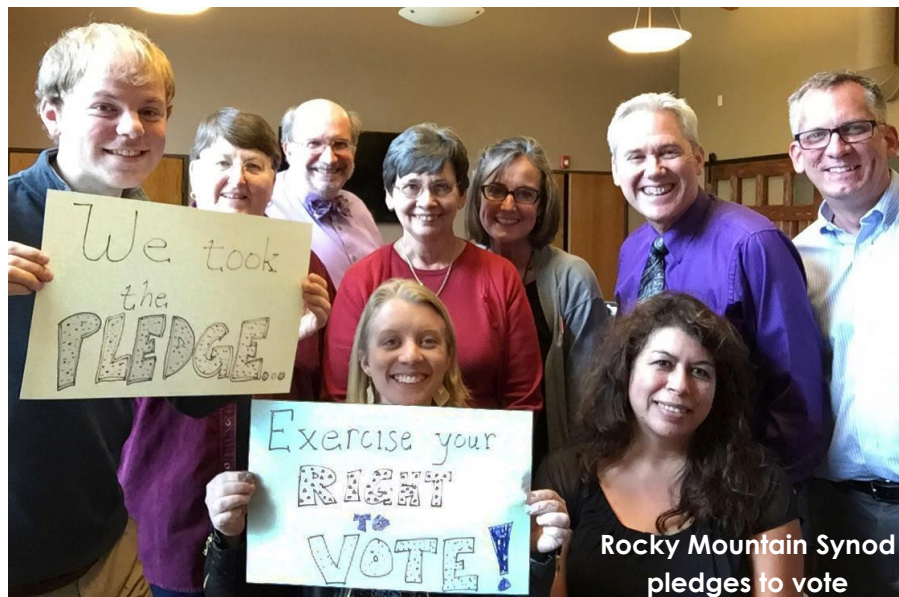
- 1. Read and understand IRS guidelines:** Remember that voter education or registration activities conducted by the church are not permissible if they show evidence of a bias for one candidate, oppose a candidate in some manner, or have the perceived effect of favoring a candidate or group of candidates.
- 2. Get help:** Form a committee or group that will handle logistics and create a timeline that clearly lays out your intentions. Talk with your pastor and congregation about registering voters in the pews or setting up a registration table after a worship service.
- 3. Know the rules and deadlines:** See page 9 for a list of state voter information websites.
- 4. Gather your resources:** Contact your local governmental offices to pick up official voter registration

cards and absentee ballot forms.

5. **Get the word out:** Encourage your congregational leaders to get involved in your efforts by making announcements about your voter registration drive during worship. Submit announcements for bulletins or newsletters and set up a table for additional information.

Other opportunities: If your congregation has community programs (i.e. a food pantry, after school program, homeless shelter, food delivery service, soup kitchen, day care or school) consider talking with the coordinator to offer voter registration information and forms to those supported by these programs. If you are part of an ecumenical or interfaith group, invite their participation as well.

6. **Submit all voter registration forms you've collected:** Many states require that voter registration forms be submitted 10 to 15 days following the dates when they were signed, so find volunteers to submit these forms in a timely fashion.



How to help make sure your public assistance agencies are prepared to register voters

Another way you can help your community engage in civic participation is to make sure your public assistance agencies are prepared.

In 1993, Congress passed the National Voter Registration Act, legislation that had an immense impact in expanding voter registration access. The law requires state offices providing public assistance to be designated as places to register to vote. In the first few years, the law increased voter registration significantly, but recently it has not been well enforced in some communities.

Here's how you can help make sure your public assistance offices are prepared to register voters:

1. Speak with your local office to inquire about their current system to support voter registration.
2. Send a letter to the agency in your state that oversees the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the Women, Infants, Children assistance program to remind them about the importance of complying with the law. (Even a kind, simple letter can make a difference!)

3. Offer to provide voter registration information and forms for your public assistance offices or to connect staff with your local election commissioner.

How to canvass your neighborhood and register voters

As elections approach, neighborhood canvassing can be a great way to encourage voter participation. Canvassing is an activity that involves knocking on doors to talk about the importance of getting out to the polls. This is a great way to meet people in your community and provide voter participation educational materials and registration information.

Here's what you will need to canvass your community:

1. A current list of your state's voter eligibility requirements.
2. Absentee ballot request information for your state. (See page 15 for more information)
3. A list of any early voting locations in your community and their hours of operation. (See page 16 for more information)
4. A list of all polling locations for Election Day.
5. A plan for providing transportation or directing community members to transportation assistance programs in your city.
6. A plan for how to discuss the importance of voting with the people you meet on your canvass.
7. A voter pledge form (see below for more information)

Encourage your community members to pledge to vote

While some in your community may be new to voting, others are already registered to vote and only need to be encouraged to participate in the electoral process. One way to do this is asking them to pledge to vote in the elections. Once someone pledges to vote, you can follow up by reminding them to cast their vote through mail-in ballot, early voting, or at their precinct polling location on Election Day. For a printable voter pledge form, see the last page of this resource.



Candidate forums

Host a forum to provide your community the opportunity to learn about candidates running for office and engage on issues that are important in your area.

In this section you will learn:

- ▶ **What candidate forums are and why this engagement is important**
- ▶ **How to set up a candidate forum**

What are candidate forums?

It is incumbent upon us as members of the body of Christ and citizens of God's world that we be as engaged as possible and to do that engagement with grace and wisdom – that is to enter the political arena “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). One way for congregations and their members to be engaged with the local community, the broader faith community, and the electoral process is by planning and conducting candidate forums.

How to set up a candidate forum:

This process of planning a candidate forum is based on the legal understanding of IRS regulations that 501 C3's can host and sponsor candidate forums (it's important for all candidates to be formally invited) but cannot sponsor gatherings for or endorse specific candidates. This process also presumes that the leadership of the host ministry has given their approval for this kind of an event.

- 1. Form a committee:** Six to seven months before the election, form a group of three to six people who are committed to the successful planning of this event and understand the connection of it to their faith. It is good to have representation from the host congregation and from the local faith community or faith-based organizations.
- 2. Determine your candidates:** Decide what level of government the candidate forum will focus on (city, county, state or national).
- 3. Pick a date:** Establish a date for the forum. Be sure to check if other community events are scheduled at the same time. The best time for these forums is four to six weeks before the general election ballots are mailed out. This usually means between Labor Day weekend and the middle of October.
- 4. Invite all candidates:** Issue a formal, written invitation (electronic version is fine) two to three months, depending on when your primary is, to ALL candidates for this office. Follow up to make sure that the candidates (or their representative) can commit to being there.
- 5. Plan a schedule:** Determine the length of the event. We recommend no longer than two hours. Planning should consider a gathering time at the beginning and also at the end for public interaction and questions with the candidates. This step should also determine the scope of the issues to be covered during the forum. Consideration should also be given to our ELCA social statements and policies and the issues facing the candidates. This will help determine what questions the planning

committee decides to ask the candidates. Be sure to leave time for a few questions from the audience. You can also have blank cards for people to write a question on and then have committee members determine which two or three will be asked by the moderator.

6. **Get the word out:** Publicity and fliers should begin four to eight weeks before the forum. Use social media as much as possible! If you would like to videotape this event, make sure all candidates give permission. A news release should be sent out one week in advance and another release one to two days before the forum.
7. **Pick a moderator:** One month before the event, pick your moderator. This role is very important. This person should have experience in conducting this type of assembly. Possibilities include: religious leaders, retired judges or retired elected office holders. The planning committee needs to go over the details of the forum with the moderator well in advance of the event.
8. **Get help:** You can consult with other organizations for this event but make your decision-making and leadership of the event clear to all involved.

We pray...

Almighty God, we lift before you all who govern this (state/province/city/town). May those who hold power understand that it is a trust from you to be used, not for personal glory or profit, but for the service of the people. Drive from us cynicism, selfishness, and corruption; grant in your mercy just and honest government; and give us grace to live together in unity and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (ELW Prayer 290b)

Absentee and mail-in ballots

Find out about your state's rules on voting by mail and help others who are unable to vote at the polls.

In this section you will learn:

- ▶ **What absentee and mail-in ballots are and how to find out if someone is eligible to vote by mail.**
- ▶ **How to apply for an absentee or mail-in ballot.**
- ▶ **Deadlines in your state for requesting and returning an absentee or mail-in ballot.**

What are absentee ballots?

All states allow you to cast your vote by via absentee ballot if you aren't able to make it to your polling location on Election Day. Many states will also allow you to vote by mail, rather than going to the polls on Election Day. This means eligible voters have several options to exercise their right to vote. Most states require you to complete an application in order to sign up for a ballot by mail, and every state has its own deadlines for making this request and mailing in your completed ballot.

Are you eligible to vote by mail via absentee or mail-in ballot?

To determine your state's rules on absentee and mail-in ballots, visit longdistancevoter.org. Here you can search for your state and see the rules and deadlines that apply.

You may also contact your city or county clerk to receive an absentee ballot. If you are overseas at election time, your nearest U.S. consulate can help you get an absentee ballot. Military personnel should contact the Defense Department's Federal Voting Assistance Program at 703-695-9330

In some states, you may only be able to vote by mail if one or more of the following applies to you:

- > **You will be absent from the state on Election Day during the entire time the polls are open.**
- > **You will be absent from the city or town of your voting residence during the entire time the polls are open because of your status as a student or spouse of a student at an institution of higher learning within the state.**
- > **You are incapacitated to such an extent that it would be an undue hardship to vote at the polls.**
- > **You are confined to a hospital, rest home, convalescent home, nursing home or similar institution, public or private.**
- > **Your state has "no-fault" absentee voting, which means you don't need a reason.**

Early voting

Help others understand how to cast their vote in person before Election Day.

In this section you will learn:

- ▶ **What early voting is and why it is important.**
- ▶ **How to find out about early voting in your community.**

What is early voting?

Early voting allows citizens to cast their vote shortly before Election Day. It is important to remember that every state has different early voting rules, and not all states offer this as a voting option. Some states have polls that open weeks before Election Day, while others are only a couple days in advance. Most states require that you are registered to vote in advance of early voting. Depending on your state, there are several ways registered voters can cast their ballots in-person early. Typically, voters go to the local elections office or to a designated polling station to cast ballots in person.

Why is early voting important?

Early voting enables broader participation by expanding access to the polls before the election. This is important, especially for those who have limited free time or flexible schedules. In the 2014 election, 28.2 percent of surveyed non-voters said they were too busy to vote ([U.S. Census](#)). On Election Day, many people have other obligations that prevent them voting. Others may be deterred from voting on Election Day because possibly the lines at the polls may mean they have to wait for hours to vote.

How to vote early

Find out if your state offers early voting by visiting longdistancevoter.org/early_voting_calendar. If early voting is an option in your area, the hours and locations of voting centers will be listed on your county elections office website. Simply search “[your county] [your state] elections office” online or visit your state elections website (listed on page 9). You can also call your county elections office to receive this information.

We pray...

God of righteousness, you stand in power over all authorities, and you rule over all governments. Let the peoples of the earth rejoice and the leaders of nations follow the way of the Prince of peace, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW Prayer 492)

Get out the vote!

Encourage your community members to cast their vote at the polls on Election Day!

In this section you will learn:

► How to encourage your community to vote on Election Day.

What is a get-out-the-vote effort?

By conducting a get-out-the-vote (GOTV) effort, you will help ensure members of your congregation or community make it to the polls on Election Day. A GOTV effort can be constructed in many different and creative ways to facilitate action based on the needs of your community, including canvassing your neighborhood or providing transportation to the polls on Election Day.

How to conduct a GOTV effort:

1. **Strategize:** Hold a strategy session that focuses on why people should vote and be civically active. If some of the barriers in your community are seemingly avoidable, brainstorm what you can do to help alleviate those obstacles. For example, if you are on a college, university or seminary campus and you decide that your peers are not voting because they are apathetic to American politics, perhaps you can focus your GOTV campaign on voter awareness. Or if the members of your community are not voting because they cannot get time off work, find child care or have no means of transportation, perhaps your campaign should be address these problems.
2. **Search for and target potential voters:** If you are conducting your efforts from a campus ministry group, you can engage your community and peers, challenging them to make informed votes. If you are working with a congregation, focus your energy on your congregation and your immediate community. In this capacity, your GOTV campaign can work hand-in-hand with your voter registration drive.
3. **Actively increase diversity:** Encourage the participation of your entire community, regardless of their political affiliation or allegiance. Making your GOTV campaign as inclusive as possible will help ensure that all of your efforts are nonpartisan and transparent. While many argue that politics can be divisive among people of different party persuasions, encouraging civic participation in the electoral process can unite members of your community and mobilize them to get out to the polls.
4. **Provide reminders wherever you can:** The week before Election Day, talk to your pastor about ways to include the importance of voting in the sermon. Lift up the electoral process and candidates in prayer and give thanks for the opportunity to participate. Offer to drive groups of congregants without access to a car to their polling places.

About ELCAvotes

Lifting our voices together to further God's work in our world

We are called to conversation and prayer around our role as U.S. residents and as people of faith in ensuring our election systems promote dignity and respect for all.

We are called to act by speaking out as advocates and engaging in local efforts to guarantee the right to vote to all citizens.

Visit [ELCA.org](https://elca.org) to find out more about our ELCAvotes initiative.

ELCAvotes is an initiative to:

- > Expand the role of the church in encouraging faithful and non-partisan voter participation by providing faith-based resources around voting;
- > Provide a framework for all Lutherans to understand and speak out about the intersection of voting and elections, race and gender and economic justice;
- > Provide young adults the tools to understand and speak about what it means to be a young person of faith who is civically engaged; and
- > Engage with and equip ethnic communities to talk about voting rights and race and their connection with elections today.

Learn more about ministries of the ELCA that are leading this effort:

ELCA Advocacy

Website: [ELCA.org/advocacy](https://elca.org/advocacy)

Email: washingtonoffice@elca.org


 /Advocacy

ELCA Racial Justice Ministries

Website: [ELCA.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/Racial-Justice-Ministries](https://elca.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/Racial-Justice-Ministries)

ELCA Young Adult Ministry

Website: [ELCA.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Young-Adult-Ministry](https://elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Young-Adult-Ministry)

 /YoungAdults

Additional resources

Lifting our voices together to further God's work in our world

ELCAvotes resources

elca.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/ELCAvotes

Visit our ELCAvotes webpage for more information, including: ELCAvotes bible studies, factsheets and discussion guides on voter suppression, voting rights and racial justice, citizenship and our communities, and promoting civility in elections.

ELCA Faith and Society resources

elca.org/Resources/Faith-and-Society

Social statement, “The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective” adopted 1991:

"Along with all citizens, Christians have the responsibility to defend human rights, and to work for freedom, justice, peace, environmental well-being, and good order in public life."

Social statement, “Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture” adopted 1993:

“When we rebuild walls of hostility and live behind them – blaming others for the problem and looking to them for solutions – we ignore the role we ourselves play in the problem and also in the solution. When we confront racism and move toward fairness and justice in society, all of us benefit.”

Social policy resolution, “Voting Rights to All Citizens” adopted 2013:

“[It is] resolved, that members, congregations, and synods of this church be encouraged to “promote public life worthy of the name” by speaking out as an advocate and engaging in local efforts such as voter registration and supporting legislation to guarantee the right to vote to all citizens ...”

Living our Baptismal Covenant

elca.org/en/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Faith-Practices/Living-Our-Baptismal-Covenant

Faith Practices in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

“We speak the truth in love as we participate in God’s mission of abundant life for all. With a deep awareness of our sinfulness and the sin of our society, with humility we speak with respect and promote change. And God calls us to speak out. An enemy of justice is silence. A justice mindset is one key way we practice our faith. A mindset and a heart filled with peace is faith in practice.”

Advocacy and the ELCA

Lifting our voices together to further God's work in our world

"Along with all citizens, Christians have the responsibility to defend human rights, and to work for freedom, justice, peace, environmental well-being, and good order in public life."

– ELCA social statement **"The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective"**

We are a church that is energized by lively engagement in our faith and life. **ELCA Advocacy** works for change in public policy based on the experiences of Lutheran ministries, programs and projects around the world.

We work to create and influence public policies that embody the biblical values of peacemaking, hospitality to our neighbors, care for creation, and concern for our brothers and sisters facing poverty and struggling with hunger and disease.

Our ELCA Advocacy Network's state public policy offices connect Lutherans and create platforms so that the voices of our communities are heard. Contact your advocacy office to learn how you can take action in your state.

California – Lutheran Office for Public Policy

Email: director@loppca.org

Website: lutheranpublicpolicyca.org

Colorado – Lutheran Advocacy Ministry

Email: pseverson@rmselca.org

Website: lam-co.org

Georgia – Southeastern Synod Advocacy

Email: pastorjustin@gslutheran.org

Minnesota – Lutheran Advocacy

Facebook: Lutheran Advocacy - Minnesota

Email: tammy@lcppm.org

New Jersey – Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy

Email: slilja@leamnj.org

New Mexico – Lutheran Advocacy Ministry

Email: ruth@lutheranadvocacynm.org

Website: lutheranadvocacynm.org

Nevada – Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy

Facebook: Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy in Nevada

Email: mp4675@att.net

Ohio – One Ohio Now

Email: nick@oneohionow.org

Pennsylvania – Lutheran Advocacy Ministry

Email: office@lutheranadvocacypa.org

Website: lutheranadvocacypa.org

Virginia – Interfaith Center

Email: office@virginiainterfaithcenter.org

Website: virginiainterfaithcenter.org

Washington – Faith Action Network

Email: fan@fanwa.org

Website: fanwa.org/

Wisconsin – Lutheran Office for Public Policy

Email: cindyc@loppw.org

Website: loppw.org

Contributors

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Contributors to “Called to Be a Public Church: ELCA Civic Participation and Voter Education Guide,” 2007-2009

I pledge to vote in my upcoming elections!



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

- ✓ Yes, I believe that people, grounded by their faith, should engage in our nation's electoral process. I believe that every person can make a significant and positive impact on the political process if they educate themselves on issues that most affect their communities.
- ✓ Yes! Please contact me to remind me to vote on Election Day!

[illegible]