

Called to be a Public Church

ELCA Civic Participation Guide

Nonpartisan Election Activities for You, Your Campus, and
Your Congregation

- + Voter registration
- + Absentee ballots
- + Get Out The Vote initiatives
- + Joining the ELCA Advocacy Network
- + Discussion guide: How are we called to be a public church?



Disclaimer: The information provided in this guide is accurate to the best knowledge of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Washington Office. While we have done our very best to provide you with current, non-partisan information regarding churches 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 church and/or its religious leaders can be involved in specific political activities.

IRS guidelines for churches with 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status: 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. Please read the "[Being a Public Church](#)" guide on our [ELCA Advocacy Resources](#) page for more information!

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Non-partisan activities for you, your campus and your congregation

Voter registration drives

What is a voter registration drive?

There are many obstacles that keep people from getting out to the polls during elections, and lack of knowledge about voter registration is unfortunately one of the biggest. The good news is that it is not very difficult or time consuming to do your part to end this problem. A voter registration drive is an effort that seeks to sign up those who are eligible to vote but are not registered. By hosting a voter registration drive at your church or campus:

- + You will be empowering people to take the first step in engagement with government at all levels. Plainly stated, a person who does not vote is not likely to write, call or visit their members of Congress or engage in advocacy efforts. **Your registration drive can plant a seed, which will make them more socially aware and willing to speak truth and power.**
- + Your presence will remind those who are already registered to begin to think critically about who best represents their personal political stance.

Check out our [ELCA Voter Registration Guide](#) to find out more on how you can host a drive at your church or neighborhood!

Absentee ballot information

How do you find information about absentee ballots? Are you eligible to vote by mail?

Yes, if you are registered to vote and you are not able to make it to your polling site on Election Day, you may be able to vote by mail, or vote ahead of time at a designated location. Please note that in some cases you will 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 suffer from an illness, mental or physical disability, blindness or your mobility is seriously impaired.
- + You are forbidden by the tenets of your religious faith from voting on Election Day.
- + You are confined to a hospital, rest home, convalescent home, nursing home or similar institution, public or private.
- + You are being detained while awaiting trial, or imprisoned for any cause other than final conviction of a felony.
- + You will be temporarily absent from the state because of employment or service connected with military operations, or are a spouse or dependent of such a person.
- + You are employed by the State Board of Elections, Elections Division of the Office of the Secretary of State, a local board of canvassers, or you are an elector assigned to work at a poll outside of your voting district.
- + Your state has “no-fault” absentee voting, which eliminates the need for any other excuse.

Getting started: How and when do I apply for an absentee ballot?

Encourage the use of absentee ballots for people who can't make it to the polls. There is generally an application process to receive absentee ballots, but you can draft a template letter requesting the application and provide copies at your registration drives.

You may obtain an application for a mail ballot from your local board of elections. In most states, you must request an absentee ballot at least a month before the election. You can check for important election deadlines in your state through the Federal Election Commission Web site (www.fec.gov) or with your local elections office. 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.

Get Out The Vote initiatives

What is a Get Out The Vote campaign?

Simply stated, a Get Out The Vote (GOTV) campaign encourages people to go to the polls on Election Day.

Getting started: A GOTV effort can be constructed in many different and creative ways to facilitate actions based on the needs of your community. This can mean anything from canvassing your communities to providing transportation assistance to the polls on Election Day. Below are some ideas for how your effort could take shape:

- + **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 GOTV campaign should be aligned to provide assistance to address these problems.
- + **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 church, 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, which will target new potential voters to register so they are eligible to vote.
- + **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!
- + **Compile a voter file.** A voter file is a list of registered voters in a district that includes their name and contact information. These lists are generally maintained by your local elections office. This information is public and can either be purchased for a small logistical fee, or you can compile your own list of individuals that you have registered through your efforts. Voter files are helpful in identifying which voters need to be reminded to vote. This list can be used as a starting list for your canvassing efforts or during a phone banking event.

- + **As the election approaches, neighborhood canvassing can be a great way to rally support for participation.** Canvassing is an activity that involves walking through your campus or community, knocking on doors to instigate conversations about the importance of getting out to the polls. Again, you need to control what you talk about — keep your comments nonpartisan. But this can be a great way to meet people in your community and provide a cheap and effective way to distribute voter education material and registration information. **A sample script is available on page 6.**

What you will need for your canvassing event:

- A current list of your state's voter eligibility requirements
 - Absentee ballot request information for your state
 - A list of any early voting locations in your community and their hours of operation
 - A list of all polling locations for Election Day
 - A plan for providing transportation or directing community members to transportation assistance programs in your city
 - A plan for how to discuss the importance of voting with the people you meet on your canvass
- + Host an issue discussion barbeque, pizza party, debate, nominating convention watch party or other election-related social function. This can be particularly effective on college, university or seminary campuses. Note: This activity needs to be bipartisan — providing equal opportunity to both major political parties. So if you show the debates of one political party, you need to show the debates of the other, even if they are on different dates. You will also have to contact the sponsors to make sure that a public showing is not an infraction of copyright agreements. Use this setting to encourage conversations about the upcoming elections and have information on registration available. Helpful hint: If you feed them, they will come (particularly on college and seminary campuses!).
- + **On Election Day, make yourself visible!** Make signs to encourage voting and hold them up near busy traffic intersections, place leaflets on cars, or hand out stickers. Again, as long as you do not mention a candidate or party, you can be as creative as you would like to be.

Get Out The Vote canvassing resources

Sample canvassing script and “pledge to vote” form for a Get Out The Vote campaign

Hello, my name is (name) from (your church) in (community/neighborhood) . We’re visiting with community members today to urge you to vote in this crucial upcoming election. Are you or anyone else in your home planning to vote in the upcoming elections on November 4th?

(If YES): **Great! Are you already registered to vote and do you know how to find your polling location?** (Give any relevant information on early voting sites, voter eligibility, and voting locations for Election Day. You can also direct them to your state’s website for voting information)

(If NO): **I’m sorry to hear that!** (Tell him/her why you, as a person of faith and community member are casting your vote this November. Make sure they know that you are simply concerned about making sure all voices are heard in this year’s election.) **It was wonderful to meet you and I hope you will consider our conversation and continue to talk about voting with others.**

Note: *Allow the conversation to flow as easily as you are able. Answer any questions posed politely and to the best of your ability. However, it is important to remember that you can discuss issues with people generally, in terms of pointing them to websites or local media sources that are able to answer their questions in greater detail (see the end of the guide for a list of other organizations that have nonpartisan voter information which might help answer additional questions), but be certain that you take a nonpartisan stance throughout your conversation.*

For example, if someone asks you who they should vote for, your response needs to simply state that answering that question defeats the purpose of your call. You simply want each person that you speak with to engage in the electoral process. Whom they vote for is entirely up to them.

Pledge to Vote!



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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!

Name and mailing address	Phone number	Email	I want to help get out the vote!	Please remind me to vote!	Sign me up for ELCA Advocacy Updates!

Important state government websites

State and website

AL <http://www.sos.state.al.us/>
AK <http://www.elections.state.ak.us/>
AR <http://www.sos.arkansas.gov/>
AZ <http://www.azsos.gov/>
CA <http://www.sos.ca.gov/>
CO <http://www.sos.state.co.us/>
CT <http://www.sots.state.ct.us/>
DC <http://os.dc.gov/>
DE <http://sos.delaware.gov/>
FL <http://election.dos.state.fl.us/>
GA <http://www.sos.state.ga.us/>
HI <http://hawaii.gov/elections/>
ID <http://www.sos.idaho.gov/>
IA <http://www.sos.state.ia.us/>
IL <http://www.elections.il.gov/>
IN <http://in.gov/sos/elections/>
KS <http://www.kssos.org>
KY <http://www.elect.ky.gov/>
LA <http://www.sos.louisiana.gov/>
MA <http://www.sec.state.ma.us/>
ME <http://www.maine.gov/sos/>
MD <http://elections.state.md.us/>
MI <http://www.michigan.gov/sos/>
MN <http://www.sos.state.mn.us/>
MO <http://www.sos.mo.gov/>
MS <http://www.sos.state.ms.us/>
MT <http://www.sos.mt.gov/>
NC <http://www.sboe.state.nc.us/>
ND <http://www.nd.gov/sos/>
NE <http://www.sos.state.ne.us/>
NH <http://www.sos.state.nh.us/>

State and website

NJ <http://www.state.nj.us/state/>
NM <http://www.sos.state.nm.us/>
NV <http://www.sos.state.nv.us/>
NY <http://www.elections.state.ny.us/>
OH <http://www.sos.state.oh.us/>
OK <http://www.elections.state.ok.us/>
OR <http://www.sos.state.or.us/>
PA <http://www.dos.state.pa.us/>
RI <http://www.sec.state.ri.us/>
SC <http://www.scvotes.org/>
SD <http://www.sdsos.gov/>
TN <http://state.tn.us/sos/>
TX <http://www.sos.state.tx.us>
UT <http://www.utah.gov/itgovernor/>
VT <http://www.sec.state.vt.us/>
VA <http://www.sbe.virginia.gov/>
WA <http://www.secstate.wa.gov/>
WI <http://www.elections.wi.gov/>
WV <http://www.wvsos.com/>
WY <http://soswy.state.wy.us/>

Called to be a Public Church discussion guide

How are we called as individuals 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.

What does civic engagement mean for the church? Scripture reveals God's presence in all realms of life, including political life. This church understands government as a means through which God can work to preserve creation and build a more peaceful and just social order in a sinful world. The electoral process 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."

For the church, the effort must include Bible study and consideration of faithful decision-making. But it also involves facilitating voter registration programs, getting people to the polls, encouraging poll watching and monitoring, instigating issue discussions, 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. As people of God, we have been freed to love our neighbor, seek peace and justice, and care for God's creation. Faith should inform not only our participation, but also how we look at public issues and interpret what is happening in political life.

Our Christian faith compels us to attend to the world through the lens of our relationship to God and to one another. As a public church, we have a responsibility to step outside our comfort zones and challenge ourselves to address issues that affect families, communities and neighbors throughout the world. As a church body, the ELCA uses its prophetic voice boldly to address important political, social and economic issues that affect local and global communities. This work grows out of our theological understanding of God at work in the world and is articulated in the social statements of this church, which you can find at www.ELCA.org/socialstatements on the Web.

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 an amazing opportunity to strengthen the public debate around the electoral process by allowing our faith to ground our political ideals. As long as 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.

References: ["Called to be a Public Church: ELCA Civic Participation & Voter Education Guide", 2009](#); "Lutheran Book of Worship"

Resources to encourage civic participation and responsible citizenship

["Being a Public Church: Guidance for churches and clergy participating in the electoral process"](#) – IRS guidelines for congregations with 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status

Get involved by joining the ELCA Advocacy Network

What is the ELCA Advocacy Network?

We are a church that is energized by lively engagement in our faith and life. The **ELCA Advocacy Network** and **ELCA Advocacy Office** work for change in public policy based on the experience of Lutheran ministries, programs and projects around the world and in communities across the United States.

We work to create and influence public policies that embody the following biblical values:

- + **Peacemaking**
- + **Hospitality to strangers**
- + **Care for creation**
- + **Concern for people living in poverty and struggling with hunger and disease**

Learn more about advocacy in the ELCA: Visit www.ELCA.org/advocacy



Facebook: www.facebook.com/ELCAAdvocacy



Twitter: www.twitter.com/ELCAadvocacy

Advocacy Office Washington, D.C.

Email: washingtonoffice@elca.org
Phone: 202-626-7947

Lutheran Office for World Community New York, N.Y.

The Lutheran Office for World Community monitors the work of the United Nations on behalf of the ELCA and The Lutheran World Federation, working for peace, dignity and reconciliation for all people.

State advocacy offices

ELCA state advocacy offices represent the church in advocating at the state government level with and on behalf of those without economic or political power.

Arizona –	Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Arizona
California –	Lutheran Office of Public Policy - California
Colorado –	Lutheran Advocacy Ministry - Colorado
Illinois –	Lutheran Advocacy – Illinois
Iowa –	Social Justice Advocacy Lutheran Services in Iowa
Minnesota –	Lutheran Coalition for Public Policy in Minnesota
Nevada –	Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy in Nevada (LEAN)
New Jersey –	Lutheran Office of Governmental Ministry in NJ
New Mexico –	Lutheran Advocacy Ministry – New Mexico
Pennsylvania –	Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Pennsylvania
Virginia –	Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy
Washington –	Faith Action Network
Wisconsin –	Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin



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