



civicengagement

# ELCA Civic Engagement Guide

A resource guide to encourage, empower and equip voter education and other responsible civic participation shaped by faith values.



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

ORIGINALLY POSTED: February 2020

**CONTENTS**

A MESSAGE FROM THE ELCA PRESIDING BISHOP .....3

INTRODUCTION TO LUTHERAN CIVIC ENAGEMENT .....4

ABIDING BY THE LAW .....5

DISCUSSION STARTERS — CALLED TO BE A PUBLIC CHURCH .....6

VOTER PARTICIPATION AND FAITH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.....9

    LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS REMINDER .....9

    RESOURCING YOUR COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO VOTE .....9

        Voting rights for all citizens .....9

        Holding difficult conversations..... 10

        Exercising the right to vote ..... 10

        A friendly, familiar face..... 11

        Engagement with the marginalized ..... 11

        From registered voter to voter: In-person or not..... 11

        Absentee and mail-in ballots ..... 12

        Early voting..... 12

    INTERACTING WITH CANDIDATES ..... 12

ELCA VOTERS — ENGAGED AND ACTIVE..... 14

    ALL YEAR-ROUND..... 14

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TIPSHEETS..... 15

    VOTER REGISTRATION INITIATIVES ..... 15

        A state-by-state process..... 15

        How-to's..... 16

    PLEDGE TO VOTE SIGNUP SHEET ..... 18

    CANDIDATE FORUMS..... 19

    GET OUT THE VOTE INITIATIVES .....21

## A MESSAGE...

*from the ELCA presiding bishop, the Rev. Elizabeth Eaton*

As we prepare for the upcoming election season, I commend this guide to you and your congregation. 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.

WE ARE CHURCH. Centered on the cross, nourished by word and sacraments, we find our life and strength. The ELCA social statement *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* guides our public speech and ethical actions as the church in the world. In it we commit 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.”



WE ARE LUTHERAN. As Lutherans, we affirm God’s presence in all realms of life, including political life. 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.” We understand that Christians are called to be stewards of our common life through serving as faithful and active citizens.

WE ARE CHURCH TOGETHER. As church together the ELCAvotes initiative serves to educate, equip and encourage discipleship through participating together in the electoral process. Casting our ballots is one way in which we live out our affirmation of baptism to “serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus.” We strive for justice and peace in all the earth and serve our neighbor by securing and expanding voting rights to ensure that all voices are valued, and every voice is heard.

WE ARE CHURCH FOR THE SAKE OF THE WORLD. The ELCA is a church called by Jesus Christ to be a public witness to the love of God poured out for all. 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 advocates, 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.

This guide will be a useful tool for you and your ministries as you wrestle with faithful responses to difficult issues in this election cycle and those to come. Remember that voting is only one action toward faithful civic participation; many more opportunities to use your voice on behalf of those in need are available at [www.elca.org/advocacy](http://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,  
**Elizabeth A. Eaton**  
 Presiding Bishop  
 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

## INTRODUCTION

### *Introduction to Lutheran civic engagement*

Our faith is integral to how we, as Christians, attend to the world. Our beliefs and actions are shaped by our relationships with God and one another.

Civic engagement, according to a [frequently referenced definition](#), means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the knowledge, skills, values and motivation needed to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community through both political and nonpolitical processes.

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. They are to recognize the vital role of law in protecting life and liberty and in upholding the common good. Christians need to be concerned for the methods and the content of public deliberation. They should be critical when groups of people are inadequately represented in political processes and decisions that affect their lives. (ELCA social statement *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, 5)

As a church body, the ELCA uses its prophetic voice boldly to address important policy issues that affect local and global communities. This activity grows out of our theological understanding of God at work in the world, articulated in the social teaching of this church and the experiences of our members, congregations, ministries and partners. Find social teaching documents of the ELCA at [ELCA.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society](https://www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society).

ELCA members, rostered ministers, congregations, synods, seminaries and college and university campus ministry groups are among those who can and should play a vital role in Lutheran civic engagement. This Civic Engagement Guide\* contains ideas and guidance for the process.

\* This 2020 edition draws from the Civic Engagement and Voter Participation Guide, updated in 2018, and from “Called to Be a Public Church: ELCA Civic Participation Guide,” published in 2016 and including contributions from the ELCA Racial Justice Ministries, the ELCA Young Adult Ministries and the ELCA Advocacy network partners Faith Action Network (Wash.) and Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy (N.J.).

## LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

### *Abiding by the law*

An important part of faithful civic engagement is abiding by the law.

This church respects the God-given integrity and tasks of governing authorities and other worldly structures, while holding them accountable to God. (*The Church in Society*, 3)

Any participation by congregations in activities related to the electoral process must be strictly nonpartisan and abide by Internal Revenue Service (IRS) guidelines. 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” ([irs.gov](https://www.irs.gov)). Noncompliance with IRS Tax Code 501(c)(3) can cost your institution its tax-exempt status. Congregations and rostered ministers must ensure that activities related to the electoral process are transparent, nonpartisan and legal.

The information provided in this ELCA Civic Engagement Guide is accurate to the best knowledge and experience of ELCA Advocacy. Additional ways to clarify whether a political activities are permissible and which are unacceptable under the auspices of 501(c)(3) tax status include a guide from ELCA Advocacy and seeking outside advice.

- Consult the ELCA Advocacy guide “[Being a Public Church: Guidance for Churches and Clergy Participating in the Electoral Process](#).” It provides examples of permissible and questionable forms of political activity and a chart explaining whether election activities are appropriate for churches as institutional bodies, clergy as representatives of a congregation, clergy as individuals or church members as individuals.
- Seek outside advice. No resource can substitute for checking with your attorney, the IRS or federal or state agencies administering election laws regarding the extent to which a congregation and/or its religious leaders can be involved in specific political activity legally.

## DISCUSSION STARTERS

### *Discussion starters - Called to be a public church*

God is at work in our world! Graciously justified by faith, we are freed in Christ to live a faith active in love for God's world and our neighbors, and we are drawn with Christ to hurting places. Our Christian faith informs our convictions, and our voices carry important values into public discourse and policy-making. Every day God is at work in sinful institutions, and we prayerfully and reflectively need to be there too.

If your congregation or ministry is considering purposeful civic engagement, or if you are deepening your personal involvement, consider these questions to get your reflections flowing and plans started.

#### 1. Why do you — or don't you — vote?

The simple act of casting your vote can have a powerful effect. In our electoral system, your vote means that your elected officials are accountable to you. As a result, you become an advocate for what you want to see in this country.

#### 2. Does being a Christian impact how you vote?

The electoral process is one way to 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” (more at [www.elca.org/Resources/Faith-Practices](http://www.elca.org/Resources/Faith-Practices)). For the church, these efforts must be grounded in the word of God, prayer, communal discernment and faithful decision-making that take into account not just our own experiences but also the well-being of our most vulnerable neighbors.



#### 3. Based on your faith-formed values, what considerations for you and your community do you take into the voting booth with you?

Many ELCA ministries name accompaniment as foundational to their way of being in the world. An [ELCA Accompaniment resource](#) reads, “In mission, we live out reconciliation. In Christ’s reconciliation, we are all in relationship, all part of the body of Christ. We are not just called to love those who love us, who ‘get’ us and understand us because we are very much alike. Rather we are called to love and be loved by those who are not like us, whom we might have to work quite hard to understand, or who may not understand us at all. God’s reconciliation is across borders and boundaries.”

#### 4. Does being a Lutheran impact how you vote?

As Lutherans, we do not endorse a particular candidate, party or form of government or strive for a

## DISCUSSION STARTERS *continued*

Christian one. Instead we engage those who govern, we participate in deliberation and decision-making and we evaluate our government according to its ability to provide for the common good.

Government is intended to serve God's purposes by limiting or countering narrow economic interests and promoting the common good. ... Governing leaders are to be held accountable to God's purposes: "May [they] judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. ... May [they] defend the cause of the poor of the people" (Psalm 72:2). (ELCA social statement *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, 11)

5. "Voting is central to our faith because it is part of the prophetic voice of faith, for the sake of the world," says the Rev. Wolfgang Herz-Lane, former bishop of the ELCA Delaware-Maryland Synod. What do you think of this statement?

The process of voting prompts us to name our faith values and then act on them through casting a ballot.

Aware that we do not have all the answers, and actively seeking God's guidance, we have a responsibility to step outside of our comfort zones and challenge ourselves to address issues and ask questions that affect families, communities and neighbors as near as our own backyard and as far away as the opposite side of the globe. With humility as well as conviction, we boldly witness on important concerns of the day that grow out of our understanding of God at work in the world and that are articulated in ELCA social teaching.



6. Even if you are a dedicated voter, are you aware of any neighbors you don't see at the polls?

National Public Radio, summarizing a 2016 analysis of Census Bureau data from the Pew Research Center, [reported recently](#) that people with higher incomes tend to vote more frequently. Nonvoters are more likely to have lower incomes, be young, Hispanic or Asian-American. "It's debatable whether election results would be different if the entire population voted," the story noted, "but voting determines more than which candidate wins or loses. It ultimately influences which policies elected officials enact and whose interests candidates ignore and acknowledge."

7. Pick a setting from this list. What kind of civic engagement might take place there?
  - a. Sidelines of a soccer field
  - b. School board meeting
  - c. Commute while reading a newspaper (digitally or with ink on your hands!)
  - d. Public hall hosting someone running for office

**DISCUSSION STARTERS** *continued*

This list is far from exhaustive. Every setting is an opportunity — like that taken by the pastor when he helped people outside a fast-food restaurant complete voter registration cards [read in [ELCA Advocacy blog](#)], by the bishop who wrote an op-ed on migration issues in his state [read in [Living Lutheran magazine](#)] or by the congregation member who raised her hand with a question at an August-recess town hall meeting [more in [August Recess resource](#)].

**8. What about in church?**

When we reflect on our values, faith-driven service activities and experiences, and educate ourselves about the policies surrounding issues, there are many activities that we can conduct — as individuals, in congregations and in other partnerships — that both demonstrate our Christian faith as Lutherans and have value for our communities and country.

Below are some possibilities: holding voter registration drives, sharing absentee ballot information, interacting at candidate forums and hosting Pledge to Vote commitments and Get Out the Vote events.

## VOTER PARTICIPATION

### *Voter participation and faith community engagement*

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. Voting is one of the most important ways we 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 and neighbors for the next two to eight years.



Voting is a first step in faithful civic engagement, giving us the opportunity to meet God at work in our world — an opportunity not to be missed. As communities of faith, we can provide opportunities for taking part in the political process.

#### LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS REMINDER

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 rostered ministers must ensure that activities related to the electoral process are transparent, nonpartisan and legal.

Focus on activities that encourage people to participate in the electoral process. Remember, voter education or registration activities conducted by the church are not permissible if they show evidence of a bias that would favor one candidate over another, if they oppose a candidate in some manner or if they have the perceived effect of favoring a candidate or group of candidates.

Read about restrictions and prohibitions on the IRS website: [irs.gov](https://www.irs.gov).

#### RESOURCING YOUR COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO VOTE

A civically engaged church can participate in its community in many ways.

#### Voting rights for all citizens

Lutherans have long been involved in protecting voting rights in the United States. The ELCA has affirmed the significance of voting in various resources, including the social statement *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture* and the social policy resolution “Voting Rights to All Citizens.” These social teaching documents call on us to speak out



## VOTER PARTICIPATION *continued*

as advocates and engage in local efforts such as voter registration and supporting legislation that guarantees all citizens the right to vote.

Voting access for all wasn't established in 1776. Many people, particularly people of color, face barriers to exercising their right to vote, from the voter suppression of the Jim Crow era in the 19th and 20th centuries to the current climate of restrictive voter laws.\*\* The right to vote must be protected and within reach.

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*, 4)

As a church, host conversations about why this matters to us and what we can do about it.

### Holding difficult conversations

Election season is, unfortunately, a time of heightened rhetoric aimed at instilling fear and belittling others. The church of Jesus Christ is uniquely equipped to foster and model civil relationships and dialogue, invite trust amid differences and lead healthy community conversations on the common good.

As a church, the ELCA is committed to “a moral deliberation that deals openly with conflict and controversy,” as stated in *Freed in Christ* (6). Many models, including the [Talanoa Dialogue](#) and [Deliberative Dialogue](#), offer practical guidance for holding difficult conversations. Communal discernment on issues can be a significant contribution to civic engagement. “In fact,” the social statement continues, “such deliberation has helped us to discover new dimensions of mission and new possibilities for ministry” (6).

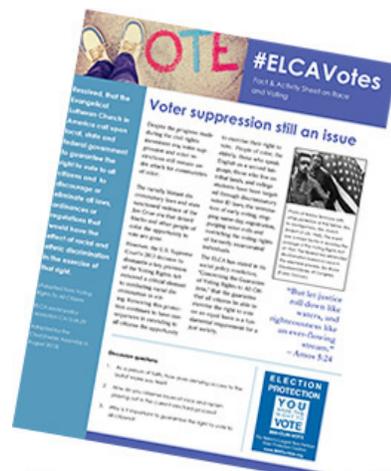
### Exercising the right to vote

Civic engagement also calls us, as people of faith, to vigilantly ensure the right to vote in both policy and practice. Action to facilitate access to this right can include voter education and registration.

In almost all states and the District of Columbia, individuals who vote in a federal election must first register to vote. However, a sizable share of eligible citizens do not register, and not all who are registered cast ballots.

- In 2014, census data indicates 21.4% of eligible citizens were not registered to vote, per [pewtrusts.org](http://pewtrusts.org).

\*\* Find additional information in “#ELCAvotes Faith & Activity Sheet on Race and Voting,” posted among ELCA Advocacy resources, including an activity to see yourself and your neighbor on major dates in voting history.



When were you eligible to vote? Activity sheet in this resource gets conversation rolling.

## VOTER PARTICIPATION *continued*

- In the 2016 presidential election, only 56% of the voting-age population cast ballots, per [pewresearch.org](http://pewresearch.org).
- In that same election, only 87.3% of registered voters cast ballots.
- In the 2012 election, 80.2% of those making more than \$150,000 a year voted whereas only 46.9% of those making less than \$10,000 a year voted, per [politico.com](http://politico.com).

Participation gaps persist along racial, educational and income lines, with disproportionately low registration among communities of color, young people and low-income Americans, per [census bureau statistics](http://census.bureau.statistics).

There are several reasons churches have, should and can get involved in voter registration.

### A friendly, familiar face

Our congregations are rooted in their neighborhoods and communities. They are places of trust, inclusion, new beginnings and faith. Someone who feels excluded from the political process, whether traditionally skeptical of politicians or simply unfamiliar with campaign volunteers from across town, may be more receptive to taking part in registration and elections if welcomed by someone they know. Inclusion is a fundamental principle of democracy and of our faith.

### Engagement with the marginalized

In our makeup, our practice and our theology, churches are engaged with the most marginalized members of our community. We have the opportunity to include those of us who are disenfranchised and those who many activists or typical political campaigns 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 who may not otherwise be civically engaged. Maybe the person lacks easy access to transportation or the time to figure out how to register on their own. Or maybe the person thinks 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 to cast a ballot are more likely to do so again. Civic involvement is an investment that, if fostered, can bloom and grow. Registration can plant a seed of increased social awareness and faith-based public life.

Use the Voter Registration Initiatives tipsheet for important information on voter registration rules and deadlines as well as tips for holding a voter registration event.

\*\*\* “Voter guidelines for people facing homelessness,” posted to ELCA Advocacy resources in 2019, highlights the monumental role communities of faith can play in ensuring inclusiveness.

## VOTER PARTICIPATION *continued*

### From registered voter to voter: In-person or not

Encouraging registered voters to cast a ballot is another civic engagement activity. Use the Get Out the Vote Initiatives tipsheet for tips to prompt registered voters to exercise their right, along with a Pledge to Vote Signup Sheet tipsheet to help people be mindful of exercising their electoral privilege.

Informing congregation and community members of voting options may be very helpful. The percentage of voters who cast their ballots on a voting machine at a polling place on Election Day has declined steadily over the past decade. According to the [U.S. Election Assistance Commission](#), in 2004 one in five voters cast ballots early, absentee or by mail; by 2016 that number was two in five. People confined to a hospital, rehabilitation center or similar institution, or others too incapacitated to vote at the polls, may especially appreciate Election Day polling place alternatives.

### Absentee and mail-in ballots

All states allow you to cast your vote by absentee ballot if you are unable to reach your polling location on Election Day. Many states will also allow you to vote by mail rather than go to the polls on Election Day. This means eligible voters have several options to exercise their right to vote.

Most states require voters to complete an application in order to qualify for voting by mail, and every state has its own deadlines for making this request and mailing a completed ballot. You can access your state's absentee-voting rules at [www.vote.org/absentee-voting-rules/](http://www.vote.org/absentee-voting-rules/) and its ballot deadlines at [www.vote.org/absentee-ballot-deadlines/](http://www.vote.org/absentee-ballot-deadlines/).

Military personnel with voting questions may contact the Defense Department's Federal Voting Assistance Program at 800-438-VOTE (8683) or visit [www.fvap.gov/](http://www.fvap.gov/).

### Early voting

Early voting permits citizens to cast ballots in person at a polling place prior to an election. This is important, especially for those who have limited free time or inflexible schedules. In the 2016 election, 14% of nonvoters surveyed said they were too busy to vote, according to a [Pew Forum](#) report. Others may be deterred from voting on Election Day because lines at polling places can mean waiting for hours to cast a ballot.

As of Oct. 23, 2019, 38 states and the District of Columbia permitted no-excuse early voting and three states utilized all-mail voting systems, according to [ballotpedia.org](http://ballotpedia.org). Every state has different early-voting rules. Some may open voting weeks before Election Day whereas others open the polls only a couple days in advance. Typically, voters go to the local elections office or a designated polling station to cast an early ballot in person. The National Association of Secretaries of State has a useful online guide at [nass.org/can-I-vote](http://nass.org/can-I-vote) to link voters to state-specific early voting information (as well as identify their polling place!).



## VOTER PARTICIPATION *continued*

### INTERACTING WITH CANDIDATES

Citizens might engage with candidates for elected office in opportunities arranged by the candidate, events hosted by community entities and even forums coordinated by local congregations or faith-based coalitions.\*\*\*\* In the question-and-answer process, people of faith can model and express their convictions while learning about candidates and raising important issues.

Valuable sources of candidate information include the League of Women Voters\*\*\*\*\* and other nonpartisan organizations. These sources can help you explore a candidate's stance on issues important to you. The Circle of Protection, a coalition of Christian denominations (the ELCA is a founding member) and anti-poverty organizations, has challenged presidential candidates in 2012, 2016 and 2020 to address the issue of offering help and opportunity to hungry and poor people in the U.S. and around the world. Responses from the candidates are available at [circleofprotection.us](http://circleofprotection.us).

At campaign trail events, candidates for elected office will often answer questions. Your question can spark an important conversation and hold that candidate publicly accountable. Visit a candidate's website for date, time and location of upcoming events.



Planning and conducting a candidate forum is another way for congregations and their members to engage with the local community, the broader faith community and the electoral process. Entering civic engagement “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16) can be an opportunity for both nonpartisan action and grace-filled leadership.

The Candidate Forums tipsheet has additional information for congregations and coalitions hoping to set up an event.

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\*\*\*\* [“Guidance for Churches and Clergy Participating in the Electoral Process,”](#) available on the ELCA Advocacy resource page, includes a useful chart describing practical concerns for participating in election activities as institutional bodies, as representatives of a congregation, as individual clergy and as individual church members.

\*\*\*\*\* [VOTE411.org](http://VOTE411.org), an initiative of the League of Women Voters, offers centralized ballot information and data on registration and polling places.

## ELCA VOTERS

### *ELCA voters - engaged and active*

The ELCA tagline “God’s work. Our hands.” reminds us to put our faith into practice. One way we live into our baptismal covenant is by striving for justice and peace in all the earth.

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. (“Faith Practices — Living Our Baptism,” [ELCA.org](http://ELCA.org))

Prompted by our faith, civic engagement in the electoral process and with democratically elected leaders can have positive impact not just on ourselves but also on the well-being of our neighbors and God’s good creation.

Additional #ELCAvotes materials are available from [ELCA.org/votes](http://ELCA.org/votes), and ELCA social teaching documents are available from [ELCA.org/resources/faith-and-society](http://ELCA.org/resources/faith-and-society).

### ALL YEAR-ROUND

ELCA Advocacy is available to support your efforts. More than 16 states have public-policy offices in the ELCA Advocacy network. Find the latest list and location map on the [ELCA Advocacy resource page](http://ELCA.org/advocacy). Connect with federal ELCA Advocacy at [ELCA.org/advocacy](http://ELCA.org/advocacy) and on social media at @ELCAadvocacy. Sign up for the ELCA Advocacy network for policy updates and Action Alert opportunities at [ELCA.org/advocacy/signup](http://ELCA.org/advocacy/signup).



## TIPSHEET: VOTER REGISTRATION INITIATIVES

### *Voter registration initiatives*

There are many obstacles that keep people from getting to the polls during elections, and lack of knowledge about voter registration is one of the biggest. Fortunately, it is not very difficult or time-consuming to take part in solving this problem!

A voter registration drive is an effort to sign up those eligible but not registered to vote. Within your congregation and/or in community outreach, you can be part of connecting voters with civic opportunity.

[M]embers, congregations, and synods of this church [are] 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. (ELCA social policy resolution “Voting Rights to All Citizens”)

Assuring that 100% of your eligible church membership is registered and ready to vote is a doable goal, as is expanding outside into your greater community with a voter registration drive to connect your neighbors with the electoral process.

#### **LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS REMINDER**

An important part of faithful civic engagement is abiding by the law. Remember: Any participation by congregations and/or rostered ministers in civic engagement activities related to the electoral process must be strictly nonpartisan and abide by Internal Revenue Service (IRS) guidelines. No resource can substitute for checking IRS rules and regulations, consulting federal and state agencies that administer election laws or asking your attorney to what extent a congregation and/or its religious leaders can be legally involved in specific political activity.

### **A STATE-BY-STATE PROCESS**

The rules for registering new voters or updating existing voters’ registration information differ depending upon your county or state. Begin by informing yourself about the rules in your community. (Find this information at [vote.gov](http://vote.gov) or [www.vote.org/voter-registration-deadlines/](http://www.vote.org/voter-registration-deadlines/).) Then you can help equip others.

Whether you are helping register a new citizen who is unfamiliar with the process or helping update the registration information of a young adult who has just moved, your support can make the difference between that voter feeling empowered or disenfranchised, between their casting a ballot or concluding their participation doesn’t matter.



## VOTER REGISTRATION INITIATIVES *continued*

### HOW-TO'S

- Decide what you want to do. Set up a table after Sunday service? Reach out to adults at a program affiliated with your congregation (e.g. food pantry, afterschool program or homeless shelter)? Host a phone-a-thon reaching out to members in the congregation directory? Staff a booth at a neighborhood spot or event to facilitate registration? Arrange a community event with other local faith leaders?
- Form a committee or group to strategize and handle logistics. This team should create a timeline that clearly states your intentions and delineates duties.
- Talk with your pastor and/or other appropriate congregation representative about the plan. Use church communication tools, including bulletins and newsletters, to publicize the effort.
- Learn your state or district's registration rules through your secretary of state or county clerk. For example, does your jurisdiction require that voter registration assistants be officially trained and registered as "third-party registration agents"? Pay special attention to registration deadlines and issues on the ballot. **BONUS TIP:** Create a fact sheet about your state's registration process to share with others. Be prepared with your state's absentee ballot and early voting information. A list of all polling locations on Election Day may also come in handy.
- Plan around your state's voter registration deadline.
- Obtain voter registration cards from your local Board of Elections. **BONUS TIP:** While you're there, pick up absentee ballot forms, too! **BONUS TIP:** Online registration is an option in some jurisdictions.
- Get the word out! Encourage your congregation leaders to get involved.
- Print signs and gather supplies for drive day. Voter registration cards, pens, chairs and clipboards are essential. **BONUS TIP:** We suggest two signs: 1) "Register to Vote Here" and 2) "According to Federal Election Commission rules, our voter registration services are available without regard to voters' political preference."
- Be aware of challenges faced by potential voters on Election Day. **BONUS TIP:** Some congregations

### Voter registration sites at public assistance offices

In 1993, Congress passed the National Voter Registration Act, which has had an immense impact. 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.

Consider speaking with your local public assistance office staff to inquire about their voter registration support. Even a kind, simple letter about the importance of complying with the law can make a difference!

**VOTER REGISTRATION INITIATIVES** *continued*

focus on getting voters to the polls by telephoning them and/or providing transportation.

- Designate volunteer(s) to physically transport voter registration cards to the appropriate government office in a timely manner to assure their validity.
- Track your progress! How many voters have you registered? Consider reporting results back to your congregation. **BONUS TIP:** Send the results to the ELCA Advocacy office at [washingtonoffice@elca.org](mailto:washingtonoffice@elca.org) — it is encouraging to see what we can do together!

A church's registration drive can plant powerful seeds. Use responses to make new local connections and consider mobilizing around Election Day to remind people to vote. Not only will the number of voters increase, you may also inspire people to engage further with policy-making that impacts our individual and community lives.

***"But I'm already registered!"***

Congregation and community members you encounter during a voter registration drive can also be invited to sign a "Pledge to Vote!" sheet.

A sample can be found in the ELCA Civic Engagement Guide.



## TIPSHEET: CANDIDATE FORUMS

### *Candidate forums*

Some congregations and faith-based coalitions may decide to host a forum to enable your community to learn about candidates for office and engage on important issues in your area.

#### **LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS REMINDER**

An important part of faithful civic engagement is abiding by the law. Remember: Any participation by congregations and/or rostered ministers in civic engagement activities related to the electoral process must be strictly nonpartisan and abide by Internal Revenue Service (IRS) guidelines. No resource can substitute for checking IRS rules and regulations, consulting federal and state agencies that administer election laws or asking your attorney to what extent a congregation and/or its religious leaders can be legally involved in specific political activity.

Setting up a candidate forum requires the approval of a host ministry, significant advance planning and a clear understanding of IRS regulations, but the forum can serve your community well and raise awareness of your church's faith-based concern and civic engagement. If you have not previously held a forum, partnering with an experienced organization such as another faith community or non-partisan group like the League of Women Voters can help ensure its success.

### **1. Form a planning team**

Six to seven months before the election, recruit three to six people who champion the connection of faith and civic engagement. Try to have representation from the local faith community or faith-based organizations, especially any congregation hosting or sponsoring the event.

### **2. Determine your candidates**

Candidates are likely running for city, county, state and/or national office. Decide on what level of government your candidate forum will focus.



### **3. Pick a date**

Be sure to check if other community events are scheduled at the same time as yours. The best time for these forums is four to six weeks before general election ballots are mailed out. This usually means between Labor Day weekend and the middle of October.

**CANDIDATE FORUMS** *continued***4. Invite all candidates**

Issue a formal invitation (electronic version is fine) two to three months in advance of the primary to ALL candidates for the office at the level you have determined. Follow up to make sure the candidates (or their representatives) can commit to being there.

**5. Plan forum schedule and process**

Determine the length of the event. (We recommend no longer than two hours.) Consider a gathering time at the beginning and also at the end for candidates to interact with the public and take one-on-one questions. This step should help you determine the scope of the issues to be covered during the forum. When formulating questions for candidates, consider our ELCA social teaching documents, ELCA Advocacy policy priorities and issues facing the candidates. Be sure to leave time for a few questions from the audience. To facilitate audience questions, provide blank cards for people to fill out, have committee members select two or three questions, and pass these along to the moderator.

**6. Get the word out**

Publicity should begin four to eight weeks before the forum. Circulate flyers and exploit social media. If you would like to stream or share video of the event, make sure all candidates give permission. Send out a news release one week before the forum and a second release one or two days before the forum.

**7. Pick a moderator**

One month before the event, select a moderator. This role is very important. The person should have experience conducting this type of assembly. Consider religious leaders, retired judges and retired holders of elective office. Have the planning committee review the details of the forum with the moderator well in advance of the event.

**8. Get help!**

You can consult with other organizations to make your event a success, but make sure that everyone involved honors the event's leadership and decision-making process.

**We pray...**

Almighty God, we lift  
before you all who govern.

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.

*Evangelical Lutheran Worship, 77*

## TIPSHEET: GET OUT THE VOTE INITIATIVES

### *Get out the vote initiatives*

Help ensure that members of your congregation and community visit the polls on Election Day! A Get Out the Vote (GOTV) effort can be constructed in various creative ways, based on the needs of your community.

Here are some ideas for getting out the vote, but you may find your own!

- Canvassing your neighborhood and encouraging neighbors to vote
- Providing transportation to the polls on Election Day
- Collecting signatures on a voter pledge signup sheet in your church lobby or another neighborhood venue to raise awareness and commitment
- Starting a text or phone-call tree to remind others of their civic responsibility and faith opportunity on Election Day
- Using social media, church bulletins and other outlets to share reminders, success stories and suggestions for how to get involved

#### **LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS REMINDER**

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To launch a GOTV effort, consider these tips.

### **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 seem surmountable, brainstorm what you can do to help overcome those obstacles. For example:

- If you are on a college, university or seminary campus and decide that your peers are not voting because they feel apathetic toward politics, focus your GOTV campaign on voter awareness.
- If members of your community cannot get time off from work to vote, find them childcare or facilitate their early voting on another date.
- If members of your community lack transportation to a polling station, use a church van or schedule volunteers to provide rides.

### **2. Search for and target potential voters**

Your GOTV campaign may work well hand-in-hand with a voter registration drive.

**GOTV INITIATIVES** *continued*

- If you are conducting your efforts from a campus ministry group, engage the larger community along with your peers and challenge them to cast informed votes.
- If you are working with a congregation, focus your energy on that congregation and its immediate community. Many local election bureaus offer county and neighborhood lists of voter registration data — often for free or at a low cost for interested advocates.

**3. Actively increase diversity**

Encourage your entire community, regardless of political affiliation or allegiance, to participate in your GOTV campaign. Be as inclusive as possible to ensure that your GOTV efforts are nonpartisan and transparent. Politics can divide people of differing party persuasions, but civic participation in the electoral process transcends politics. Your GOTV initiative can unite members of your community and mobilize everyone to visit the polls.

**Wondering where to vote on Election Day?**

A polling place locator at [vote.org](http://vote.org) will direct voters to the state-by-state local answer.

**4. Visit areas that campaigns ignore**

Hard-to-reach areas such as high-rise complexes, affordable housing units and shelters are often ignored by traditional political campaign activists. Many such places welcome voter registration drives if residents or the appropriate agencies receive advance notice. Remember: Voter registration DOES NOT count as soliciting! For more information on the specific voting qualifications of those struggling with homelessness, see the [ELCAvotes Guidelines Resource](#).

**5. Provide reminders wherever you can**

Before Election Day, talk with your pastor about ways to stress the importance of voting, including in the sermon. Lift up the electoral process and candidates in prayer, and give thanks for our opportunity to participate in the electoral process. Announce Election Day activities such as driving congregants to their polling places.



The ELCA social policy resolution “Voting Rights to All Citizens” urges 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.” A GOTV effort can advance positive civic engagement.