



*Faith in Elections Playbook*

**Offering your space or finding an alternative so your community has enough polling locations**



## Offering your space or finding an alternative so your community has enough polling locations

A lack of polling locations can suppress turnout and decrease trust in the process. Faith-based organizations have served our democracy for decades by providing their own spaces and by working in their communities to find secular spaces where people can vote. Religious institutions currently play a major role in our voting infrastructure. Over 12,000 houses of worship across America open their doors to voters, representing roughly 20% of all polling locations. In Oklahoma and Arkansas, churches are the majority of polling locations.

Even with this commitment from faith-based organizations and the work of local election officials, some areas still have voting deserts. These can decrease voting access and diminish trust in elections. An insufficient number of polling locations can make it difficult for rural voters and those without access to a vehicle or public transportation to vote. Marginalized communities are disproportionately impacted.



### THE NEED

- A [2022 study](#) found that due to the Shelby v. Holder decision, in the 13 states that were previously required to disclose any changes to voting districts or election administration, 1,688 polling locations were closed between 2012 and 2018.
  - Some of these closures have been balanced out by an increase in countywide polling locations, generally known as vote centers. These are more centralized locations where large groups of voters from various precincts can vote. However, an increase in countywide polling locations harms some.
  - [Studies](#) have shown that trading local polling locations for larger vote centers “could make it harder for some groups of voters to get to the polls and lower the likelihood that they will cast ballots.”
- Native Americans who live on tribal land often have few polling locations, which dramatically decreases their access to polls.
- The problem of inadequate polling locations is [particularly challenging](#) for poorer, rural counties that lack major community centers, professional sports stadiums, and other spaces that are large enough to accommodate voting.
  - There are often not enough polling locations near college campuses.



## THE RESPONSE

- Religious structures can be well-suited to serve as polling locations because they are often large hubs for community activities, and many meet the requirements of the [Americans with Disability Act](#) and the [Help America Vote Act](#).
- Religious houses of worship are deeply embedded in their communities and can find suitable public or secular spaces that can adequately serve as a polling location, including community centers, schools, sports complexes, and other compliant institutions.
- In addition to providing for a specific need in the community, even the act of offering space can let election officials know that there are additional polling location options should the need arise.
- Spaces near a college campus are especially useful as a polling location to serve the full community. The [Andrew Goodman Foundation](#) and [Campus Vote Project](#) work on this issue.

*During the 2020 election, African Methodist Episcopal churches across Georgia volunteered their locations as polling locations. Bishop Reginald Jackson told the [Atlanta Journal Constitution](#), “There’s no excuse to have less than an adequate number of polling sites and not enough poll workers. All of the AME churches have agreed to become polling sites if they’re needed.”*



## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- Before determining whether this is something to pursue:
  - Make certain that your organization can meet the requirements and that you can comfortably, fully commit to all that this entails. Remember that you will likely have thousands of people making their way through your space, many of whom do not share your religious identity.
  - Consider whether there are logistical or security concerns.
  - Be sure that you can meet the full-time commitment that is required, including early voting in certain counties. These dates may fall on religious holidays or other times in which your space will be unavailable to the public.
  - Then, call your local election officials and determine whether more polling locations are needed in your area.

- Talk to voters in your area about whether they think more polling locations are needed, and advocate with your Secretary of State or county officials to add more polling locations. Offer to work with them to find adequate locations.
- In many counties, institutions that host polling locations are compensated for the use of their space.
- In some cases, faith institutions serving as polling locations can help to build cohesion and trust between the house of worship and its neighborhood. In other cases, [such as in Florida during the 2016 election](#), institutions such as mosques and Islamic Centers have faced threats and harassment when they offered their space in this manner.
- As the [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America guide](#) describes, if your house of worship has a school attached you must ensure that there are security measures in place to separate where the children are from where people will be voting.
- The ELCA guide also notes that you should ensure that your organization's insurance carrier is aware of and okay with your building being used as a polling location.
- The federal court decision in *Otero v. State Election Board* established that houses of worship can serve the purely secular purpose of providing a place for individuals to vote. To ensure that houses of worship are not going beyond that purpose, [they should avoid activities](#) such as:
  - Distributing religious literature to people standing in line.
  - Placing voting booths where voters are facing distinct religious symbolism such as an altar or a sacramental item.
  - Displaying anything that could be construed as partisan in nature.
- Here are some of the basic steps for ensuring whether a location is able to serve as a polling place (You can find more information in the [A More Perfect Union guide](#)):
  - Step 1: Ensure your space is fully ADA-compliant
  - Step 2: Contact your county and offer your space as a polling place/vote center
  - Step 3: Check with board and staff to confirm requirements can be met
  - Step 4: Consult the Secure Community Network with any security concerns
  - Step 5: Check for scheduled conflict



## RESOURCES AND LINKS

- High priority states and counties will be updated regularly; [sign up](#) to receive Faith in Elections Playbook updates.
  - [Secure Communities Network’s security guide](#)
  - [National Council of State Legislatures polling location guide](#)
  - [Emgage Guide on How Mosques Can Serve as Polling Locations](#)
  - PDF checklist: [A More Perfect Union guide](#)
  - [The Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility checklist](#)
  - [Church Law Center’s Guide for Churches Serving as Polling Locations](#)
  - [Sample Vote Center Requirements from Los Angeles County](#)
  - [Sample Polling Location Guide from Berks County, Pennsylvania](#)
  - [ELCA Polling Location Guide for Churches](#)
  - [Andrew Goodman Foundation and Campus Vote Project](#)

*“...in 2019, the County Clerk [in Houston, Texas] was able to designate the community center in the Islamic Institute & Houston Blue Mosque as an official polling location. This opened up new opportunities for Muslims to get involved and build relationships with local community Officials.”*

**- [Emgage: Empowering Engaged Muslims](#)**