

# FAITHFUL ELECTIONS IN COVID

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August 2020

**Faithful Democracy  
Unheard Voices -  
Chapter 4**



# Chapter Four

## Faithful Elections in COVID 19

The coronavirus pandemic has upended daily life and exposed the shortcomings of our national systems in so many ways. The new context has similarly revealed the fragility of voter protections in our patchwork system of election administration. In our nation the right to vote is precious, almost sacred, and people of faith are called to correct the injustices encountered in our society.

This Unheard Voices COVID Chapter is a helpful resource for the faith community to navigate the changing landscape and emerging challenges for voters this election season. The challenges for the 2020 election are unprecedented in scale and complexity. The opportunities are plentiful for people of faith to engage for the better. This resource is meant to help voters:

1. **Navigate the system, understanding what options are available for their circumstances, and**
2. **Find points of engagement to contribute to a successful election and influence decision-makers.**

**THIS ELECTION DAY COME PREPARED!**

**Election Prayer Card**


God of many names, you humble us by your power to change the course of history.

You remind us of the fragility of things we take for granted. We feel unmoored and adrift; help us to meet this moment as steadfast, courageous citizens. Plant gratitude, inspiration and motivation in our hearts to preserve our democracy, for it is the best way we know to create a better, more just society.

Give us courage to face the challenges of this election and a spirit of hopeful persistence to do our part in this hallowed endeavor. We ask that this struggle bring our nation closer to our collective, higher purpose and new recognition of our shared common good.

Divine challenger, you are with us in adversity.

Carry us through these dark times and help us persevere in the struggle to include the voices of all voters. Creator of human agency, help us act as faithful citizens so that we the people will be heard through our votes. Guide us to take action, communally and individually, on behalf of a true, safe, and just election.

The logo for Faithful Democracy, featuring a stylized sunburst or starburst design above the words "FAITHFUL" and "DEMOCRACY" in a bold, sans-serif font.

**“Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part to help build what we called the Beloved Community, a nation and world society at peace with itself.” -the late John Lewis**  
**Ordained Baptist Minister and U.S. Congressman**

# 2020 Elections & the COVID Context

Our first Unheard Voices chapter, Voting Rights and Disenfranchisement, looked at the fight for voting rights in the context of racially motivated voter suppression that has plagued the history of our nation. The coronavirus pandemic offers an opportunity to reaffirm that a Faithful Democracy is one that protects its citizens' fundamental right to vote, that ends voter suppression and that administers elections in ways that ensure equal access to the ballot. We believe that equal access to participation in our political systems is foundational in a representative democracy, even in a pandemic.

Our faith also calls us to prioritize the preservation of life and wellbeing. COVID 19 and, in some cases, failed policy responses to the pandemic, is endangering lives. Policies that force people to choose between their health and their right to vote are wrong. Voting in November is both a public health issue and continues to be a racial justice issue since people of color are both more susceptible to COVID-19 infection and more likely to experience long lines and congestion at the polls.



*The line to vote in the Wisconsin 2020 Primary Election  
photo by Tim Carpenter. @TimCarpenterMKE/ Twitter*

## Recognizing the Most Vulnerable

People of color are disproportionately burdened with COVID-19 and experience higher death rates compared to white people in the United States. Nationally, Black people are dying of COVID-19 at twice the expected rate based on their share of the national population and Hispanics and Latinos also account for a disproportionate share of cases. Native Americans have also experienced higher rates of COVID-19 with devastating impacts in tribal communities.

For a variety of reasons, voters of color tend to cast their ballots in person on Election Day rather than opting to use absentee ballots. Moreover, studies have shown that voters of color, on average, must wait significantly longer in line to cast their ballots. All of these trends point to a 2020 election that threatens disproportionate harm to these communities if adequate measures are not taken to minimize risk of exposure to the virus. While people of all ages can contract COVID-19, older persons and those with poor health or with preexisting conditions are more vulnerable to severe complications and death resulting from the virus.

This vulnerability is amplified by potentially crowded in-person polling places. Older people have higher voter participation rates than younger adults and should not have to compromise their health to vote. As people of faith, we are each responsible for protecting the most vulnerable and ensuring they are not needlessly exposed to risks in an election.

**God does not change the condition of a nation unless it changes  
what is in its heart. – The Qur'an,13:11**

# A Patchwork System

Voting procedure is determined on a state-by-state basis, which makes it a complex national network of differing rules and regulations. Depending on where you are registered, there are different laws around what form of identification is required to vote, what days and times you can vote, how your state holds primaries, as well as requirements for absentee or voting by mail.

Elections are complicated enough under normal circumstances, however COVID-19 is also shifting deadlines and impacting rules on a case-by-case basis to adapt to public health concerns. Perseverance and diligent participation is our responsibility as people of faith. In 2020, this not only means casting our ballots responsibly, but a commitment to learning, educating, and advocating for an election where all to have equal voice.

## A PATCHWORK SYSTEM

### Election Stats

Using the 2016 election as an example helps us understand the complexity of our election system. That year in the general election:

- ❖ **917,694** poll workers operated...
- ❖ **116,990** polling places, which included...
- ❖ **8,616** early voting locations across the country.

These 116,990 polling places have differing procedures across each state and sometimes even across each county, which makes uniform delivery of the process nearly impossible.

<https://www.eac.gov/documents/2017/11/15/eavs-deep-dive-poll-workers-and-polling-places>

## Reflection Questions

- ❖ *What are the challenges of a patchwork system of elections? What are the advantages?*
- ❖ *What rules or standards would make sense as a guarantee for all voters?*



# Being a Faithful Voter

Elections are a massive and complicated endeavor in any nation, but the decentralized jurisdictions in the U.S. make it uniquely complex. Moreover, the individual voting process in COVID is complicated by changing rules, limited operations and personal judgements of health risks. This section outlines the process for casting one's ballot, noting common changes or challenges to each step brought on by the pandemic. The single most important takeaway for a faithful voter in COVID 19 is to decide early how you will vote and begin the steps now to help ease the strain on our systems as Election Day nears.

**“Voting...is the most fundamental access point for individuals to have a voice in the public policy decision-making process...[shaping] the future of our local, regional and global collective life.” – Sandra Sorensen, Director of Washington Office, United Church of Christ (UCC)**

## Voter Registration

In many places, voter registration has been severely disrupted in COVID 19. Social distancing and quarantine guidelines may limit access to government offices that provide voter registration services or may disrupt postal service, especially as registration deadlines approach. Moreover, the number of in person registration drives, which often take place at events and locations with high foot-traffic have decreased significantly due to public health concerns.



*New Jersey National Guard photo by Mark C. Olsen/Flickr*

Fortunately, it is easy and convenient for many Americans to register to vote online. As of July 2020, a total of 40 states plus the District of Columbia offer online registration. Online voter registration is the same process as in-person registration except the form is completed digitally and is submitted directly to local election officials. However, not all states provide online voter registration, so registering can be a real barrier for voters living in those states--particularly for first time voters. Many states also allow voters to register at the same time that they vote, which can simplify the process significantly. These options allow Americans to safely and easily register to vote while avoiding unnecessary exposure to COVID-19 and should be available to everyone.

- Visit [vote.org](https://www.vote.org) to check your registration status, to learn the rules in your state or to register to vote. The site walks you through the process depending on your state's rules and you can sign up for alerts to track progress and get updates about your election.
- If you're considering an in-person registration drive, be sure you make it safe by taking precautions for COVID as outlined [here](#).

# Absentee Ballots

All states provide the option for voters to submit ballots without going to a physical polling location. Absentee voting, vote by mail, and mail-in ballots are all terms used to describe this method of voting. More than three quarters of American voters will be able to cast ballots through the mail in the fall, according to a [Washington Post](#) tracker of existing state rules. Voting by mail should be available to all voters in a pandemic, but some states limit the option significantly or require cumbersome steps for voters to take advantage of it.

In COVID-19, many states are accommodating increases in absentee voting by expanding access, proactively mailing applications and extending deadlines for mail-in ballots. While absentee voting exists in every state, some restrict who is eligible to request an absentee ballot. In two-thirds of the states, voters do not need an explanation to vote absentee (“no excuse absentee voting”), the other states require an excuse.

Applying for an absentee ballot can be a cumbersome process in some states. For example, sixteen states require a signature witness or signature notarization. Many have rules requiring voters to send application forms directly to their local election office.

Once the application to vote absentee is received the election office will verify the voter through state voter registration rolls and signature matching against records on file. Some states maintain a permanent list of voters who automatically receive an absentee ballot for all future elections once they have been vetted and approved.

## Delays at the Post Office

### From Your Kitchen Table to the Ballot Box

The United States Postal Service (USPS) is responsible for the quick and secure delivery of mail-in ballots. It is no wonder then, that recent USPS’ delivery issues have received so much scrutiny. Recent administrative changes at the highest levels of the agency, coupled with a financial crisis decades in the making, have led to severe operational cuts that are interrupting the timely delivery of mail.

Election specialist have raised alarms that growing delivery backlogs in local post offices could delay mail-in ballots or that they might simply just fall through the cracks. The interruption of regular mail delivery undercuts confidence in one of America’s most trusted institutions at a time when alternates to in-person voting are so important.

Having other options to return a ballot helps alleviate the strain on the Postal Service. For example, some voters have access to secure 24-hour drop-off boxes for ballot returns or they may drop them off at any officially designated voting location on or before Election Day. This significantly improves the flow of ballots and alleviates pressure on the postal service during peak ballot returns. Each state or locality decides whether to offer these options.

Absentee ballots are similar to standard paper ballots, but their envelopes include a space for the voter's signature and must be signed when brought to a U.S. Postal Service Office. Ballots delivered via USPS typically include some form of tracking once in transit. Increased demand for voting by mail due to COVID-19 is expected to strain both delivery and administrative systems, so voters wanting to vote by mail should account for delays in delivery times.

There are many security measures to protect against vote-by-mail fraud, such as the ballot envelope, software to verify voters identification, and ballot counting software. Several studies of vote by mail systems have found no evidence that their use has increased electoral fraud. Additionally, many states and local jurisdictions conduct post-election audits to identify misconduct and irregularities, as happened in 2018 when they caught absentee ballot misconduct by a Republican political operative in North Carolina.



Absentee options should be available to all voters during the pandemic to avoid unnecessary exposure to COVID-19. There has been a huge uptick in vote by mail in primaries since the outset of the pandemic because when voters have the option, many are choosing to take advantage of it.

Every voter should have this option to avoid risking their health and wellbeing in order to fulfill their civic duty and vote.

- Visit [vote.org](https://vote.org) to complete an absentee ballot request form once you are registered to vote. The site walks you through the process depending on your state's rules and you can sign up for alerts to track progress and receive updates about your election.

## In Person Voting

Even with mail-in options, many voters will cast their ballots in person on Election Day. Public health measures have changed in-person voting procedures in familiar ways based on [CDC guidelines](#). Many polling places will make it mandatory to wear a mask when voting in person. Social distancing and disinfecting of communal items such as pens and voting booths should be the norm. Some locations will offer drive-up voting to facilitate the process and minimize exposure. Voters drive in to a designated area where a poll worker checks them in and provides a paper ballot to complete.

**“The right to vote without any impediments or obstructions is one of the most basic privileges of our democracy...”–Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Haggray,  
American Baptist Home Mission Societies**

Many states have also expanded the early voting window before Election Day to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 from large crowds at polling locations. Early in-person voting follows the same procedures as Election Day voting except designated locations are open for voting days, or even weeks, before Election Day. This can significantly decrease the wait times and crowding on Election Day and reduce the burden and risk to poll workers.

Unfortunately, a few states still resist expanding or offering no-excuse early voting. Other states significantly limit the number of early voting locations. That creates real barriers for voters living far from early voting locations and for whom transportation is an issue. The number of early voting locations, period of availability and convenience to voters are public health issues in a pandemic.



Even as measures are being adopted to make poll stations operationally safer in the midst of COVID, the move to mail-in ballots has led many states to drastically reduce the number of locations available to vote in-person. It can seem counterintuitive, but having more polling stations also means safer elections as voters will disperse across locations. Moreover, these reductions disproportionately harm Black, Indigenous, and communities of color due to many of the same historical barriers that existed before COVID 19.

Voting by mail presents unique challenges for Black, indigenous and other voters of color because of historical barriers which have never been adequately addressed. For example, indigenous voters often live on tribal lands and reservations that lack residential addresses. Voters with limited English proficiency often rely on assistance at in-person polling stations to cast their ballot. Many Black voters face barriers of trust from generations of voter suppression, thus preferring to avoid any extra chain of custody, instead returning their ballots directly.

Voting by mail inevitably increases the possibility of errors in the process—things can go wrong. So in-person polling places must always be available as a final recourse to cast one's ballot. Faithful voters will need to consider their own circumstances when deciding how to vote.

- Find your polling place at [vote.org](https://www.vote.org), and sign up for alerts when changes occur.

## Reflection Questions

- ❖ *How does the pandemic offer opportunities to reform outdated election systems?*
- ❖ *Who benefits when voting is more accessible and easier?*



# Wisconsin and Georgia: Cautionary Tales

Wisconsin and Georgia's primary elections during COVID-19 revealed how the pandemic is adding new layers to historical, systemic problems that disproportionately affect Black and voters of color. Elections in a pandemic risk creating new means of voter suppression, leading to lower turnout and sapping confidence in our democratic systems.

## **Wisconsin's Failure to Act Likely Stifled the Vote**

On April 7, over 400,000 Wisconsinites risked exposure to the novel coronavirus to vote for the Democratic Presidential nominee and the Wisconsin's Supreme Court Justice. Wisconsin was among the first states to hold in-person voting following the onset of the pandemic and stay-at-home orders. Despite public health concerns, state officials refused to expand access to allow no-excuse absentee voting. The Wisconsin Supreme Court struck down Governor Tony Evers' executive effort to postpone the primary until June.

At the same time, Wisconsin's election officials closed numerous polling locations due to a dramatic downsize in polling staff. Milwaukee, a city with a large Black population, closed over 97 percent of its polling places, thus limiting voter turnout on Election Day. Few polling places and fears of contracting COVID-19 likely depressed Black voter turnout by wide margins.† Polling place closures coincided with high COVID-19 cases in most cities with large Black and Latinx populations.

Partisan politics, a public health emergency and historical racial injustices combined in Wisconsin to suppress voter turnout and cast doubt over the legitimacy and integrity of its elections. All voters, but especially voters of color, faced unnecessary and dangerous barriers to voting in this year's primary election. What many hoped would be Wisconsin's cautionary tale was followed by another disastrous primary in Georgia just two months later.

## **Georgia's Actions Continue to Weaken Representative Democracy**

Georgia's 2018 Midterm election had already cast doubts on the state's democratic systems. During that election partisan machinations and technical delays propped up one of the most egregious examples of voter suppression in modern history. Millions of potential voters were unknowingly purged ahead of the election and voters faced long lines and other restrictions. Despite scathing criticism and heightened scrutiny, voters were subjected to these issues again in this year's June primary. Disproportionately voters of color again had to wait in lines of up to seven hours in inclement weather in order to cast their ballot—this time while knowingly exposing themselves to a deadly virus. Delayed absentee ballots, poll closures, poll worker shortages, inadequate training, and broken machines all contributed to the nightmare scenario. Even though voter turnout in the primary ended up surpassing historical levels, it was undoubtedly voters of color who's participation was suppressed.

Decisions about election rules and administrative choices made at the local, state and federal levels have enormous consequences for voters this fall. Resisting common sense reforms to protect the rights and health of voters is particularly egregious during a contagious, deadly pandemic that threatens lives. The burdens and the risks of these poor policy choices fall unduly on voters of color.

The short documentary *Suppressed: the Fight to Vote* about Georgia's 2018 election has been updated with coverage from the 2020 primary. Stream it at [https://www.bravenewfilms.org/suppressed\\_2020](https://www.bravenewfilms.org/suppressed_2020)

**Jewish tradition teaches us to be engaged citizens and goes further to say that the selection of leaders is not a privilege but a collective responsibility.**

**“A ruler is not to be appointed unless the community is first consulted.” -**

**Babylonian Talmud, B'rachot 55a**

## Being a Faithful Citizen

The complexity of our election systems combined with the chaotic, rapidly changing environment of the pandemic makes the 2020 election a real test of our democratic systems. People of faith must be sure to vote, but we are called to take further civic action for this election. Dedicated civic engagement is needed from all citizens of goodwill in circumstances that threaten our foundational institutions. Faithful citizens are called to provide direct service in elections, to find creative ways to help public sector employees, to actively help voters overcome barriers and to push decision-makers to do the right thing.

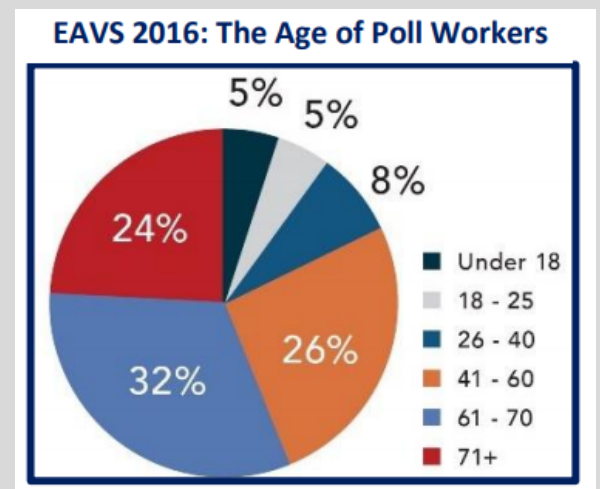


*Kentucky National Guard photo by Capt. Cassandra Mullins/Flickr.*

## Serve at the Polls

Poll workers play a crucial role in ensuring the strength and integrity of the voting process. They are the lifeblood of well-run polling places and they help secure our rights as U.S. citizens. Poll workers check in voters, answer questions, set up and test voting machines, issue ballots, and generally act as a resource for voters who encounter problems - from registration issues to voter ID questions to language barriers.

Poll workers are often paid for their service. Once poll workers are trained by local election officials, they often return to serve in multiple elections. Hence, many states and local jurisdictions have come to rely on older poll workers and lack effective poll recruitment strategies. The demographics are especially problematic in light of vulnerability to the virus because many trained poll workers are opting out of service during the pandemic. Election administrators and voting advocates warn that low poll worker recruitment could be a major vulnerability for the 2020 election.



Recent surveys show how the poll worker population is skewed towards older Americans, with a quarter of poll workers over 70 years old and another third of poll workers between the ages of 61 and 70.

More than two-thirds of jurisdictions said that it was either “very difficult” or “somewhat difficult” to recruit needed poll workers for the 2018 election according to a survey by the Election Assistance Commission. That survey was taken BEFORE the pandemic. Concerns about poll worker availability can and do drive administrative decisions about the hours and locations of polling stations.

The need to recruit and train a new generation of poll workers for this November is critical for a successful election. In addition to representing the next generation of poll workers, young recruits tend to be more comfortable with new technology, they bring fresh energy and enthusiasm to support older poll workers, and their engagement can stimulate investment in elections by the next generation of voters. Qualifications and requirements for poll workers vary by state and local jurisdiction

- Sept 1st is National Poll Worker Recruitment Day! Become a poll worker in your community.

## Get to Know Your Local Election Officials

The 2020 election will have unprecedented challenges. There is little time left to be ready for those we anticipate. We will also need to respond to surprises. A successful election in November will require community support and robust civic engagement before, during and after Election Day. Building relationships now is critical to help ensure open lines of communication and coordination when it is most needed.

States have an individual who oversees elections. In some larger jurisdictions, there may be an election administrator or supervisor whose sole responsibility is to run elections. In most smaller and medium sized counties, however, the county clerk, recorder, registrar, assessor, auditor or controller may serve as the election official along with his or her other county duties. One of the upsides of our patchwork election system is that local election officials are often members of the communities they serve and are approachable.

Local election officials are the boots on the ground point person for faithful citizens that want to support a smooth election. They know many of the acute challenges and are likely working at or beyond capacity trying to overcome them. Reach out and offer a hand.

Less than 5% of election offices have dedicated communications staff in a year when getting clear messages to voters effectively and efficiently is critical. Tell them about the free Elections Officials Communications Toolkit developed to support outreach and educating voters with visuals, messaging and planning tools. Ask about their plans and their concerns and offer your assistance. You never know how your support could help meet their needs or find solutions.

- Find your local election official [here](#).

### The VoteSafe Pledge

When you reach out to your local election official, ask them to join VoteSafe.Us. This is a cross-partisan coalition of election officials who all agree on two basic principles:

- ❖ All states should ensure that voters have accessible, secure mail-in ballots, as well as safe, in-person voting sites.
- ❖ Congress should ensure that states have the resources necessary to protect their voters and elections.

*More information: <https://votesafe.us/press/open-letter-to-elections-administrators/>*

## Volunteer and Mobilize to Protect the Vote

We know that there will be bad actors wanting to take advantage of challenging circumstances to suppress the vote. People of faith are called to be vigilant and neutralize such efforts. Another way to support a fair election is to volunteer as legal, field and support assistance to help protect the vote. Mobilize with thousands of other volunteers to help our fellow Americans navigate the voting process and cast their votes without obstruction, confusion, or intimidation.

### Defend Voters of Color

**The Lawyers & Collars Initiative** educates and equips African American Clergy with the needed tools and resources to protect members of their communities from unjust efforts to suppress votes.

- Learn more, contribute and sign-up to participate [here](#).

### Observe Elections

**The Election Protection Program**, the nation's largest and longest-running, non-partisan voter protection effort in the nation, has vetted tens of thousands of complaints by voters across the country this year by way of their 866-OUR-VOTE hotline.

- Sign up to learn about remote and contactless opportunities [here](#).

### Mobilize Against Suppression

Participate in the **Reclaim Our Vote Campaign** to proactively push back on known voter suppression tactics in the most problematic states. For example, mail postcards to voters who may have been unknowingly purged from registration rolls to remind them to check their registration status.

- Learn more and sign up [here](#).

**“...and the witnesses should not refuse when they are summoned”  
– Surah Baqarah, Verse 282**



## ADVOCATE FOR A FAITHFUL DEMOCRACY

This election is like no other. A successful election will rely on advocacy targeting all levels of decision-making.

### Federal Level Advocacy (As of Aug 7, 2020):



The most pressing need is for federal funding in the upcoming stimulus package for resources and programs at the state and local levels that will protect our health and ensure voters can safely cast their ballots. Call your U.S. Senators at 1-888-415-4527 to urge them to pass \$3.6 billion in the next package.

### State Level Advocacy:

Since all states have their own rules that determine voting requirements and procedures, find out what is most needed in your state. Our Faithful Democracy partners at the Mormon Women for Ethical Government (MWEG) have created a portal for state specific advocacy actions where you can personalize your message. Visit their CTA advocacy page to find out the priority actions in your state.

<https://www.mormonwomenforethicalgovernment.org/protectthevotecoordinatecta>

### Advocacy in your Local Jurisdiction:

Many choices and responsibilities are left to your local election official, which is why building relationships now can be pivotal. Sometimes your county or other local officials will have jurisdiction over critical decisions to make the election run smoothly. Your local election official can also help identify problematic rules and shortages to help target local advocacy.