

Recommendations for deciding the location of polling places

Concept of polling place

A polling place is a temporary installation in Estonia's public space that is only open during the voting week. A polling place is a clearly delineated area within a building where the voters exercise their right to vote. A polling place has stations for distributing ballot papers, voting booths, and one or multiple ballot boxes. Peace and order in the polling place are ensured by the voting district committee, whose oral orders are mandatory for all persons in the polling place. Campaigning is prohibited in the polling place, and voter may not take ballot papers out of the polling place. The path to the polling place is marked by signs.

Purpose of assessing the location of polling places

The current locations of polling places must be assessed because:

- Requirements to ensure access to polling places and procedures must be met;
- Voters are no longer tied to the closest polling place to their residence but can vote anywhere within their electoral district;
- Campaigning is prohibited only in the polling place and has been allowed everywhere else, incl. the premises through which the voter enters the polling place.

The goal is to ensure that Estonia is uniformly covered with polling places, with sufficient density to allow access to all the voters. Consequently, we must coordinate where the polling places are set up by regulating their locating principles.

Locating principles

A location is suitable as a polling place if it corresponds to four conditions: accessibility, proximity, familiarity, and recognisability. In addition to these, technical requirements also need to be considered to allow voting by using the electronic list of voters. From the aspect of protecting public health, the polling place must be large enough to accommodate the social distancing rule.

Accessibility

The polling place must be accessible for all the voters, including people with special needs or disabilities. This means that there must be parking spaces close to the building, and the path to the polling place must be free of obstacles and marked by signs. The building must be accessible with a wheelchair or a baby stroller. In the absence of a lift, the polling place must be on the same floor as the main entrance of the building, and must have enough space to move around with a wheelchair or a stroller. Uncluttered path and sufficient lighting must be ensured. If the doors of the building do not open automatically, the voters must be able to secure the assistance of the voting organisers to enter the building¹.

Proximity

The polling place must be sufficiently close to the residences of the voters. On the territories of rural municipalities and cities, polling places should be located in buildings that are in the centre or in more densely populated areas. Preference should be given to locations that are on the common trajectory for the voters. For polling places open during working days, the trajectory to keep in mind is: home-work-shopping-kindergarten/school. For polling places

¹The specific accessibility requirements are described in the so-called accessibility checklist that has been forwarded to all the rural municipality and city secretaries in 2020, and that has been annexed to the recommendations.

open during weekends, the trajectory to keep in mind is: home-recreational facility-cultural institution-shopping. When deciding the location of a polling place, access by public transport or car is a factor to take into account.

Familiarity

The polling place must be located in a building that is familiar to the voters. When deciding the location of a polling place, consideration should be given to where the voters have become accustomed to using public services or congregating for recreational purposes on the territory of the rural municipality or city. The earlier locations of polling places have proved adequate; however, their actual service load has been 500+ voters per polling place during the whole election period. In Estonia's public space, voters are used to polling places in cultural centres, rural municipality buildings, schoolhouses, libraries, and community centres. In Tallinn, Tartu, and Pärnu, polling places in large shopping centres are also common.

Recognisability

The polling place must be set up in a space where the voters' right to secrecy is guaranteed. This means that the set-up of the voting booths must not allow the act of filling in the ballot paper to be observed from the outside. The voter must be left in peace in the polling place. This means that political advertising may not be visible or audible in the polling place. This peace is best ensured when the polling place is a room that has been closed off from the other parts of the building with doors. If this is not possible, the polling place must be set apart from the rest of the building by sufficiently high separating walls. The information regarding the boundaries of the polling place must be expressed clearly. This also helps the political parties, election coalitions and citizens' associations to clearly understand where they are not allowed to hand out campaign materials or canvass voters.

Technical requirements

To allow the use of the electronic list of voters, the polling place must have enough room and the technical conditions to install work stations with computers; this includes technical infrastructure and a functioning internet connection.

Public health

In order to stop the spreading of COVID-19, the government may establish the 2+2 rule in all indoor spaces. The polling place must have sufficient surface area to allow keeping at least 2 metres of distance with others. The same distance requirement would apply to the voting booths, stations for issuing ballot papers, and the location of the ballot box(es).