

★ **HOUSTONCHRONICLE.COM** ›

<https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/texas/article/Abbott-mail-ballot-drop-off-harris-county-election-15612991.php>

Gov. Abbott limits mail ballot drop-off locations, forcing Harris County to close 11 sites

ZACH DESPART OCTOBER 01, 2020

Gov. Greg Abbott on Thursday declared that counties can designate only one location to collect completed mail ballots from voters, forcing Harris County to abandon 11 sites set up for that purpose.

Abbott's proclamation said counties also must allow poll watchers to "observe any activity conducted at the early voting clerk's office" related to the delivery of marked ballots. He said the measure was designed to improve ballot security.

"The state of Texas has a duty to voters to maintain the integrity of our election," Abbott said in a statement. "These enhanced security protocols will ensure greater transparency and will help stop attempts at illegal voting."

Abbott did not cite any examples of voter fraud, which election law experts say is exceedingly rare.

Harris County Clerk Christopher Hollins had set up 12 locations — 11 of them county clerk annex offices — throughout the 1,777-square-mile county to collect mail ballots. They offered residents an alternative to placing their ballots in the mail, amid concerns that the U.S. Postal Service would struggle to deliver ballots on time.

The county now will only be able to accept ballots only at its election headquarters at NRG Arena.

Hollins did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The Texas Democratic Party called the move "blatant voter suppression."

"Republicans are on the verge of losing, so Governor Abbott is trying to adjust the rules at the last minute," Party Chairman Gilberto Hinojosa said in a statement.

State leaders also are attempting to prevent Hollins from sending mail ballot applications to all 2.4 million registered voter. The Supreme Court on Wednesday heard oral arguments in a lawsuit filed by Attorney General Ken Paxton seeking to halt Harris County's plan.

More than 207,000 Harris County residents have requested mail ballots so far, far more than in any previous election. Hundreds have already been returned.

The language of Abbott's proclamation was similar to that used in a lawsuit filed by Houston conservative activist Steve Hotze with the Texas Supreme Court. Hotze argued that Harris County was violating the Texas Election Code by setting up multiple locations to collect mail ballots, accepting mail ballots before in-person voting began and extending the early voting period.

It was Abbott, however, who added an extra week of early voting in an effort to ensure residents could vote safely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hotze, a litigious champion of far-right causes, filed a series of lawsuits challenging restrictions Abbott and local leaders issued during the early months of the pandemic.

zach.despart@chron.com