

# GET OUT THE VOTE GUIDE 2016

**Discover how election season is a great opportunity for social action in your congregation.**

- Programmatic Ideas
- Election Year Dos and Don'ts
- Hosting a Candidate Forum
- Assisting Voters with Disabilities
- Jewish Texts on Voting and Representation
- Voter Registration Materials

**RAC.ORG/VOTE**

**Prepared by the Religious Action Center for:**

**Jewish Council for Public Affairs**

**Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association**

**The Union for Reform Judaism**

**Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations**

**United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism**

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## Introduction: Why American Jews Must Vote

Election Day – November 8, 2016 – is only months away. At stake are vital political, economic and moral issues of concern to all Americans, in addition to issues of special concern to American Jews.

In the next weeks, months and years, there will be important debates about the way our government operates and serves its citizens. Legislation on significant issues such as funding for government social safety net programs, criminal justice reform, climate change, foreign aid and support for Israel is likely to be considered, and important policies concerning economic justice and reproductive choice will be enacted by state and local governments. With the stakes so high, we must work to reverse the trend toward declining percentages of voter participation.

As Jews and American citizens, we have an obligation to participate in elections so as to ensure that our country's policies at the local, state and national levels reflect our commitment to social justice. Every vote counts and plays a defining role in setting policy agendas. It is our civic duty to register promptly, educate ourselves about the critical issues and **VOTE!**

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

*Talmud, B'rachot 55a*

The **Get Out the Vote 2016 Guide** provides you with tools, resources and information to help your congregation or community plan a successful voter engagement effort in advance of Election Day.

This guide was designed for use by Jewish congregations and communal organizations wishing to conduct their own voter registration drives and election engagement efforts. We also encourage participation in voter registration drives in the general community. The same procedures and materials that are suggested here for use in the Jewish community can be adapted for use in the broader community.

# Programming Resources

## Timeline

Use this timeline to help guide your congregation's or organization's engagement with the upcoming election. Suggested activities, program tips and sample materials for all the items listed below can be found within this guide.

### May - July

- Form a voter registration/education taskforce.
- Begin planning a candidate forum. Extend invitations to all legally qualified candidates as soon as possible.
- Begin planning "issue nights" to educate members in a non-partisan way about important policy issues.
- Include a Voter Registration Drive in your congregation or community's end-of-the-school-year programming; encourage recent high school graduates to register.
- Check out your state's rules and deadlines for registration and absentee voting on the [U.S. Election Assistance Commission's "State-by-State Guide"](http://www.eac.gov/voter_resources/register_to_vote.aspx) (full URL: [http://www.eac.gov/voter\\_resources/register\\_to\\_vote.aspx](http://www.eac.gov/voter_resources/register_to_vote.aspx)).

### August - September

- Contact your congregation and community's college students to remind them to register at their new address or obtain absentee ballots.
- Plan a date to help your community members who are homebound or in nursing homes register to vote and/or complete their absentee ballots.
- Hold a voter registration drive. Set up a table during special community events, the first day of Religious School and other "high traffic" times.
- Encourage congregants to volunteer as poll workers.

### October

- Place an ad/article in your synagogue, community or organizational bulletin or newsletter reminding people to vote.
- Coordinate transportation to the polls.
- Plan a date to help your members who are homebound or in nursing homes to complete their absentee ballots.
- Ask your rabbi to give a non-partisan *D'var Torah* on the importance of civic participation & voting.
- Send out postcards and/or coordinate a phone drive reminding people to vote.

### November

- Call college students on **November 7** to remind them of the election.
- Vote on November 8!**
- Host a party or gathering to watch the results come in.

### Post-Election

- Invite speakers to discuss policy implications of the elections.
- Plan a "Meet-and-Greet" with newly elected officials.

## Program Ideas & Tips

### *Voter Registration Drive*

By hosting a registration drive, you can demystify the registration process, focus communal energy on the privilege and responsibility of voting and provide information to plan a successful voter engagement effort in advance of Election Day.

- ✓ Send copies of the local voter registration form or the [National Mail-In Voter Registration Form](#) (available at: [http://www.eac.gov/voter\\_resources/register\\_to\\_vote.aspx](http://www.eac.gov/voter_resources/register_to_vote.aspx)) to all members of your congregation or organization, focusing particular attention on new members, high school seniors, college students and elderly and disabled citizens.
- ✓ Work with the local Board of Elections to train volunteers to register voters.
- ✓ Set up a voter registration table in a high-traffic, prominent location in the synagogue or community center. Be sure to have plenty of registration forms, knowledgeable volunteers and pens!
- ✓ Work with local civic engagement organizations to register voters in underrepresented neighborhoods.
- ✓ Decorate with red, white and blue streamers, balloons and handmade posters asking people to register to vote. (This is also a great way to get young children involved!)

### *Issue Nights*

It is our civic duty to educate ourselves about critical issues. Hosting an “Issue Night” is an opportunity to discuss diverse topics of interest to your community, and help voters make informed decisions based upon the issues that speak most strongly to them.

- ✓ Pick an issue that is important to your community and congregation: climate change, criminal justice reform, education, stem cell research, equal rights, health care, Darfur, Iran, Iraq, immigration, or others. Be sure to present the issue objectively, fully and in a non-partisan manner.
- ✓ Include an introduction by a rabbi or Jewish communal leader to provide context and explain why the issue is important to the Jewish community, without endorsing one policy position or candidate over another.
- ✓ Invite people to speak on both sides of the issue. Presenters may be local, state or federal advocates, non-profit professionals, academics or others with expertise in the policy area under discussion.

## ***Candidate Forums***

Become informed about the policy positions of the candidates running for office in order to make intelligent choices in the voting booths. Candidate forums allow community members to learn about the positions of the candidates on a range of topics from the candidates themselves. Here are some tips for planning your own candidate forum:

- ✓ Invite candidates well in advance to ensure they can add it to their campaign schedules.
- ✓ Invite all candidates who are running for a particular office; don't neglect county or municipal elections. *Special care should be taken to include minor party candidates.*
- ✓ When introducing the event, be sure to state that the congregation or organization does not endorse candidates, and that candidates' views are their own and do not represent the sponsoring organization.
- ✓ Choose a non-partisan, knowledgeable moderator. Give all candidates equal time during introductions, Q & A and concluding remarks.
- ✓ Publicize in the local community.
- ✓ Prepare questions in advance on a wide variety of issues.

See [\*\*The Do's and Don'ts of Pulpit Politics: Rules for Nonprofits: Candidates Forums\*\*](#) (pg. 19) for more information.

## Resources for Assisting Voters with Disabilities

More than 35 million voting-age people have disabilities, yet 14 million are not registered to vote, often as a result of polling place accessibility issues.<sup>1</sup> Both the Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act of 1984 and the Help America Vote Act of 2002 require polling places across the United States to be physically accessible to people with disabilities. Unfortunately, due to lack of enforcement of these laws, many polling places are still located in church basements and upstairs meeting halls that lack ramps and elevators.

*You shall not insult the deaf,  
or place a stumbling block  
before the blind.*

*Leviticus 19:14*

Almost one-third (30%) of voters with disabilities reported difficulty in voting at a polling place in 2012, compared to 8% of voters without disabilities. As a result, voter turnout among people with disabilities was 6% lower than among people without disabilities in the 2012 election.<sup>2</sup>

Leviticus 19:14 states, “You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind.” Jewish tradition teaches us of our obligation to ensure equal access for all people and to help facilitate the full participation of individuals with disabilities in our communities.

Addressing accessibility issues is paramount to ensuring congregants with disabilities are able to cast their ballots and make their voices heard on Election Day. There are a number of ways you can help in this effort:

- ✓ **Make calls or visits to voting-age congregants with disabilities and to elderly congregants to discuss voting options.** Bring a copy of voter registration forms; provide assistance in filling out and mailing in the forms as necessary.
- ✓ **Supply individuals with information they need about upcoming elections.** For example, supply large-print copies of informational materials or provide rides to and from community forums.
- ✓ **Offer to accompany a blind community member to the polls, taking care to assure the person that you will fill out the ballot according to his or her preference.** The *Help America Vote Act* requires all polling places to have at least one accessible voting machine for voters with vision impairments. However, not all

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<sup>1</sup> “Issue Brief: Voting,” California Foundation for Independent Living Center, 2009. <http://bit.ly/x0soOy>

<sup>2</sup> “Disability, Voter Turnout, and Voting Difficulties in the 2012 Elections,” report to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission and Research Alliance for Accessible Voting, by Lisa Schur, Meera Adya, and Douglas Kruse, June 2013. <http://smlr.rutgers.edu/disability-and-voting-survey-report-2012-elections>



voters may be comfortable using these machines. Federal law mandates that blind voters be permitted accompaniment by an aide of their choice to help them vote.

- ✓ **Check (in advance) to make sure your local polling places are fully accessible to individuals with disabilities.** Check for elevators, lifts, ramps, disability-accessible parking spots, etc. Where such accessibility aids do not exist, contact your local Board of Elections to address these issues.
- ✓ **In some jurisdictions, pre-Election Day voting orientations are conducted for voters with mental disabilities.** Find out if such orientations exist in your area.
- ✓ **Poll workers sometimes challenge the voting rights of individuals with disabilities when they arrive on Election Day.** Contact your chief local election official in advance to establish a system under which such challenges can be immediately rectified should they occur. In some communities, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People ([www.naacp.org](http://www.naacp.org)) and the American Civil Liberties Union ([www.aclu.org](http://www.aclu.org)) provide on-call lawyers on Election Day to ensure that every registered voter is permitted to cast a ballot.

### ***Helpful Resources:***

- Is your polling place fully accessible? Find out using this American Disability Act (ADA) Checklist: [www.ada.gov/votingck.htm](http://www.ada.gov/votingck.htm).
- For more comprehensive information about accessibility, absentee voting and more, visit the American Association of People with Disabilities resource on voting: <http://www.aapd.com/what-we-do/voting/>.

## Focus on Issues

Your congregation or organization can play a role in helping voters make informed decisions based on issues that speak most strongly to them. Inform your congregants about issues such as:

Health Care	Foreign Aid
Economic Justice	Education
Immigration	Climate Change
Israel & the Peace Process	Environmental Protection
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Equality	Judicial Nominations
Criminal Justice Reform	Reproductive Rights
Voting Rights	Stem Cell Research

For resources on these issues and more, explore the following websites:

- **RAC Advocacy:** [www.rac.org/advocacy-activism](http://www.rac.org/advocacy-activism)
- **Jewish Council for Public Affairs:** [www.jewishpublicaffairs.org](http://www.jewishpublicaffairs.org)
- **United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism:** [www.uscj.org](http://www.uscj.org)
- **Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association:** <http://therra.org>
- **Orthodox Union Advocacy Center:** <http://advocacy.ou.org/>

*Do not separate yourself  
from the community.*

*Pirkei Avot 2:5*

## Jewish Texts and Resources

*"This is the generation and those who seek its welfare" (Psalms 24:6). Rabbi Judah the Patriarch and the sages differed in this matter. One opinion was that the character of the generation is determined by its leader. According to the other opinion, the character of the leader is determined by the generation.*

*-Talmud, Arachin 17a*

**Commentary:** A community with the opportunity to choose its own leadership makes a statement about its own character by virtue of the choice it makes. We are therefore responsible for creating a community that fosters the growth of good leadership and choosing wisely among the candidates who wish to govern. Both of the opinions in the passage from the Talmud quoted above express the belief that a leader's character is causally related to that of the leader's generation. What we do, or don't do, on Election Day will define the character of our nation.

*"The heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers" (Deuteronomy 29:9). Even though I appointed over you heads, elders, and officers, all of you are equal before Me, for the verse concludes, "All are the people of Israel." -Tanchuma Nitzavim 2*

**Commentary:** The beauty of democracy is that each citizen has an equal voice in the election process; we are able to make decisions for the future of our country based on the principle of equality. The Tanchuma teaches that each of the children of Israel has equal worth in the eyes of the Almighty. Though some may take on leadership roles and rise in visibility, our creator values each person's voice. We express that voice by voting.

*"Shemiah said: Shun authority." Just what does this mean? That a man should not on his own place a crown upon his head. But others may do so. -Avot D'Rabbi Natan 11*

**Commentary:** Humility is valued in the Jewish tradition. Self-confidence is also encouraged, but all people, even those individuals who have experienced successes, are warned to maintain a sense of fallibility. How then can any leader feel confident and empowered to make decisions in the interests of the community? He or she must be chosen by the members of the community themselves. This is the essence of democracy.

*“Dina d’malchuta dina” (The law of the land is the law.)  
–Talmud, N’darim 28a, Gittin 10b, Bava Kama 113a-b, Bava Batra 54b-55a*

**Commentary:** Already in the period of the compilation of the Talmud, the rabbinic principle that civil laws must be recognized and honored had been developed. What an uncommon pleasure it is to comply with this mandate in a land whose legal code offers its citizens the opportunity to go to the polls and elect the officials who rule the land. This is a nation that in its founding documents prohibited religious tests for office and laws respecting establishment of religion, while guaranteeing free exercise of religion, which not only secured our freedoms, but ensured that our rights as citizens would not depend upon our religious identity or practices. In the United States, we have known unprecedented freedoms and opportunities. Exercising the right to vote is indispensable to ensuring our children also enjoy such freedom.

*Rabbi Yitzhak taught, “A ruler is not to be appointed unless the community is first consulted.” –Talmud, B’rachot 55a*

*Thus said the Eternal One, the God of Israel, to the whole community that I exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon... “Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Eternal in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper.” –Jeremiah 29:*

*Rabbi Chanina, the Deputy of Priests, would often say, “Pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear of it, people would swallow each other alive.”  
–Pirke Avot 3:2*

**Commentary:** Wherever we live, it is probably Egypt. There is, there really is, a better place, a promised land. And there is, there really is, a promised time. And there is no way to get from here to there, from now to then, except by joining together and marching—and sometimes stumbling—through the wilderness, watching this time not for signs and wonders, but for an opportunity to act. -Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, adapted

## ***Talking Points: Voting and Civic Engagement***

- **As in most election years, there has been talk about the effect of the “Jewish vote.”** While Jews comprise less than 3% of the population, the Jewish community’s influence in the political realm stems in large part from the traditional high voter participation rates and our concentration in key states.
- **There are many issues of concern to the Jewish community,** including education, health care, the environment, the conflict in the Middle East, civil rights and religious freedom, that will form the core of the debate in this election year. By exercising the right to vote, individuals can have a say in charting the future course for our nation.
- **Rabbi David Saperstein on Campaign Finance Reform, 1997:** “The effects of present [campaign finance] practices are pernicious, for they reduce voter access to elected officials, erode moral standards in government agencies and institutions and breed distrust and alienation. No wonder public skepticism is so rampant. How can we ever expect a fair result if the very rules of the game are unfair? How can we expect morally sound public policy when the system itself ensures disproportionate influence for the most powerful? How can we—whose religious calling includes the imperative to speak for the widow and the orphan, the poor and the children—accept an electoral process that structurally and systematically favors the richest among us?”
- **Registering to vote is now easier than ever before.** With the advent of the National Mail-In Voter Registration form, the registration process has been simplified. It is now possible to register over the internet at a number of different websites:
  - ✓ *Rock The Vote:* [www.rockthevote.org](http://www.rockthevote.org)
  - ✓ *U.S. Election Assistance Commission National Mail-In Voter Registration Form:* [http://www.eac.gov/voter\\_resources/register\\_to\\_vote.aspx](http://www.eac.gov/voter_resources/register_to_vote.aspx)
- **The Niagara Movement Declaration of Principles, 1908:** “And while we are demanding and ought to demand, and will continue to demand the rights enumerated above, God forbid that we should ever forget to urge corresponding duties upon our people: The duty to vote; The duty to respect the rights of others; The duty to work; The duty to obey the laws; The duty to be clean and orderly; The duty to send our children to school; the duty to respect ourselves, even as we respect others.”
- **Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 1837:** “In America the people appoint both those who make the laws and those who execute them; the people form the jury which punishes breaches of the law. The institutions are democratic not only in principle but also in their developments....It is clear that the opinions, prejudices, interests and even passions of the people can find no lasting obstacles preventing them from being manifest in the daily conduct of society.”

## **“Thou Shalt Vote!”**

**By Deena Fox, RAC Legislative Assistant, 2003-2004**

*“This is the generation and those who seek its welfare” (Psalms 24:6). Rabbi Judah the Patriarch and the sages differed in this matter. One opinion was that the character of the generation is determined by its leader. According to the other opinion, the character of the leader is determined by the generation. --Talmud, Arachin 17a*

Both of the opinions in the passage from the Talmud quoted above express the belief that a leader's character is causally related to that of his or her generation. The assumption of a relationship between the moral fiber of a leader and the community poses a challenge to us and to each generation. As we look to our leaders we must be able to say with pride, "You are a reflection of me and the values of my era."

We can explore this lesson by studying the biblical characters who were chosen as leaders. Of Noah, the text famously states, "Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age" (Genesis 6:9). This is taken by many commentators to mean that he was righteous in comparison with those of his generation, but in comparison with leaders in other eras he would have paled; a prime example of the leader reflecting the character of the generation. Moses, on the other hand, helped to determine the character of his generation. When the people of Israel were fleeing Egypt and they reached the Red Sea, the Israelites felt trapped and despaired. Moses was able to reassure the people and under his leadership they marched through the sea to freedom. "Have no fear! Stand by and witness the deliverance which God will work for you today," (Exodus 14:13) Moses proclaims. Again and again in the Torah we see that the people are lifted above their natural inclinations by their able leader.

The message that our leadership mirrors our generation is especially poignant for us today, living in a democracy. We are directly accountable for choosing leaders who reflect morality and good conscience, creating a community that fosters good leadership and choosing wisely among the candidates who wish to govern.

Consider the leaders of your city, your work place and your congregation or organization. Why were these individuals chosen for their roles? Do they determine the character of your community, or did the nature of your community shape them?

What we do, or don't do, on Election Day will define the character of our nation.

As in most election years, there has been talk about the effect of the "Jewish vote." While Jews comprise less than 3% of the population, Jews represent the swing vote in many large states such as New York, New Jersey, Florida, Pennsylvania and California, giving our community a level of influence that belies our small numbers. Our clout has also been magnified historically because the Jewish community traditionally voted in high numbers. However, recent studies indicate that many Jews do not vote, and many are not even registered. We must ensure that our entire community is registered and encourage individuals to exercise their right to vote.

There are many issues of concern to the Jewish community including education, health care, the environment, the conflict in the Middle East, civil rights, international affairs and religious freedom, which will form the core of the debate in this election year. By exercising the right to vote, individuals can have a say in charting the future course for our great nation.

## Sample Letters and Articles

### *Sample Bulletin or Newsletter Article:*

#### **Register to Vote Today!**

Are you registered to vote? Are members of your family registered? They should be!

American Jews have long been devoted participants in the electoral process. As a community, we have influenced elections and the passage of important legislation favoring domestic and foreign policy agenda, including support for Israel. Yet this influence may be eroded if the present declining trend in Jews heading to the polls continues.

We can restore our voting clout at the ballot box. Here are a few tips to *Get Out the Vote* in 2016:

- ✓ Be sure that all eligible members of our families are registered to vote.
- ✓ Remind students attending college that they should be registered either in their primary residence or at home and vote by absentee ballot if necessary.
- ✓ Inform senior citizens who relocate of how, when and where to register in their new locations.
- ✓ Advise “snowbirds” and others who may be away from their legal residences to register early to receive and vote via absentee ballots.
- ✓ Urge everyone you know (friends, relatives, coworkers) to register.
- ✓ Be informed about candidates and election issues.

*See you at the polls on November 8!*

### **Sample Postcard Voting Reminder:**

Dear Friend,

Federal elections will be held Tuesday, November 8, 2016. At stake are numerous local, state and federal elections and a number of issues of concern to American Jews. Please be sure to cast your ballot. *[IF YOUR SYNAGOGUE OR ORGANIZATION IS PROVIDING TRANSPORTATION, ADD: If you need a ride to the polls, please contact our office at (PHONE NUMBER) to make arrangements.]*

The polls will be open from *[HOURS]*.

As Jews and Americans, it is our civic responsibility to vote. Every vote can make a difference. Enclosed is a special blessing you can recite while casting your ballot.

Thank you,  
*[Your name]*

## ***Sample Letter to Announce Voter Registration Campaign:***

Dear Member,

One of the most important rights that we have as Americans is the right to vote. It is a right that we must not take for granted, a right that is doubly precious because it has been ours so rarely in Jewish history.

For more than eighty years, American Jews voted in overwhelming numbers. Historically, around 90% of all eligible Jews voted in federal and local elections, an action that magnified our role in American political life. We are able to assert our values, protect our interests and defend the rights of all Americans because of our participation in the democratic process.

Ensuring our voice remains heard in the political arena is essential. Our *[CONGREGATION/ORGANIZATION]* is part of a nationwide voter registration drive. Our main goal is to provide you with information on where, when and how to register and vote. *[TOWARD THAT END WE HAVE ESTABLISHED A SPECIAL VOTER REGISTRATION COMMITTEE, CHAIRED BY XXX.]* We are confident that members are politically aware and will act on the information provided. We are available to be of assistance to you in whatever way we can.

**We are enclosing four voter registration forms for your household.** You can complete the forms at home and mail them to the registrar of voters in the pre-addressed envelope provided *[OR GIVE ADDRESS IF NECESSARY]*. If you are not registered, or in doubt as to whether you are registered, please take the time today to register. Additional forms are available in our office, and we will be pleased to mail extra forms to you. You must register by *[DATE varies by state]* to be eligible to vote in the upcoming election.

**If you have moved or changed your name since you last voted or if you have not voted in the last four years, your name has been removed from the voter rolls.** If you aren't sure whether or not you are registered, please contact *[LIST THE GOVERNMENT OFFICE THEY CAN CALL TO DETERMINE THEIR STATUS]* to determine your status.

**It is especially important to encourage young voters, especially your children age 18 and above, to register and vote.** We are planning to send a letter about voter registration to members' children who are away at college or graduate school. Please supply the office with the addresses of your college-age children, if we do not already have them. We hope that you will follow up by phone on Election Day to encourage them to go to the polls or complete and mail their absentee ballots.

**Finally, if you plan to be out of town on Election Day, you may request an absentee ballot in advance from your local Board of Elections *[ADDRESS AND***



**HOURS].** The deadline for filing absentee ballot applications is *[DEADLINE DATE]*. Again, the registration deadline is *[DATE]*, so please register as soon as you can.

Participating in the democratic process is a privilege and responsibility we all share. Please be sure to register and vote on **Election Day: Tuesday, November 8.**

Thank you for your help in getting out the vote!

L'Shalom,

[Your names]  
*Voter Registration Committee*  
*Rabbi/President/Leader*

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### ***Sample Letter to College Students:***

Dear *[Name of Student]*,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing to urge you to register and vote in the upcoming election and to provide you with some information on voting procedures and options.

The right to vote is a new one for you, and it is doubly precious to us as American Jews since in other lands we have been disenfranchised and disempowered. For a variety of reasons, including a high level of education, civic pride, belief in democracy and gratitude for the right of full participation in American national life, American Jews have exercised their right to vote enthusiastically and in percentages far greater than the national average.

Voting makes a difference. Politicians and the social policies they create decide life-and-death issues: Who is homeless and who has shelter? Who guards our planet and subjects it to risk? Who makes war and who makes peace? Who fights wars? Our elected officials shape policy that affects us and should affect our Jewish sensibility. Your vote shapes and affects government.

**Registering to vote is easy! Enclosed you will find a mail-in voter registration form.** All you need to do is fill it out and mail it to the Board of Elections in the state in which you wish to vote. You may use your college or home address, but please note that registration rules vary from state to state.

**If you are registered to vote using your home address, but will be out of town on Election Day, you will need to apply for an absentee ballot (enclosed).**

Please fill it out and mail it today! The deadline for filing the application is *[DATE]*. The ballot you will receive in the mail is due on *[DATE]*. If you want to register and vote using your college address, we can help you find out where and how to register

in that state.

Participating in the democratic process is a privilege and a responsibility we all share. Enclosed is a special blessing you can recite while casting your ballot.

See you at the polls on Election Day on Tuesday, November 8!

With all good wishes,

*[Your name]*  
*Rabbi/President/Leader*

*Sample Flyer:*

**“Is silence the answer? It never was.” –*Elie Wiesel***

# **VOTE**

# **Nov. 8, 2016**

**Did you know...**

Thousands of American Jews don't vote because they are not registered.

American Jews have played, and must continue to play, a pivotal role in our democracy. American Jews who are not registered and do not vote are abandoning their right to let their voices be heard. **Make a difference. VOTE.**



Your grandparents might have given the world for it.  
They may have known what life can be like without it.  
*Don't take your rights for granted.*

**Register to Vote Today!**

## The Do's and Don'ts of Pulpit Politics: Rules for Nonprofits

**Section 501(c)(3) of the IRS Code denies tax exemption to organizations that directly or indirectly support or oppose candidates for any public office.** This absolute prohibition applies to both primary and general elections. However, involvement in non-partisan voter registration, education and get-out-the-vote campaigns will *not* jeopardize your 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status.

**Below are general guidelines that you may find useful in planning election-year activities such as candidate forums and candidate questionnaires.** Should you decide to sponsor such activities, we encourage you to read the IRS guidelines available online at <http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p1828.pdf> and consult with your local Board of Elections office. Should you have additional questions, please consult with your national organization's staff and your synagogue/organization's counsel.

### ***Voter Registration***

Non-profit organizations are permitted to engage in voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts. The targets of such initiatives must be chosen for reasons other than that they are likely to vote for particular candidates. These efforts cannot be a subterfuge for aiding a candidate, but must be a genuine non-partisan voter registration effort.

### ***Endorsements***

Among many other restrictions, Section 501(c)(3) prohibits tax-exempt non-profits from explicitly or implicitly endorsing or opposing any candidate or political party. This means neither the synagogue/organization nor someone in a capacity of representing the synagogue/organization may do so. Examples of implicit endorsements might include training volunteers to work on a particular, or select group of, campaigns, and accepting financing from campaigns or political parties to defray costs associated with 501(c)(3)-sponsored events. Allowing your facility to be used for a campaign event, even if a rental fee is paid, may be construed as implicit endorsement.

### ***Candidate Forums***

The Internal Revenue Service has held that a 501(c)(3) organization may invite candidates to a public forum for the purpose of public education, so long as the organization takes appropriate steps to ensure fair and impartial treatment of candidates.

The IRS, in assessing a forum, will look at the total picture. No one factor is determinative, but the following criteria may serve as guidelines:

- ✓ Choose a location for the forum that does not reflect political considerations.

- ✓ Assemble a non-partisan and independent panel of knowledgeable persons to prepare and present unbiased questions for forum participants.
- ✓ Design procedures for raising questions that would show no bias or preference for or against a particular candidate.
- ✓ Allow each candidate an equal opportunity to present his or her views.
- ✓ Select a moderator who acts not as a spokesperson for the sponsoring organization's views, but serves solely to ensure that the rules of the event are observed.
- ✓ State clearly that the views expressed are those of the candidates and not those of the synagogue or organization, that sponsorship of the event is not intended as an endorsement of any candidate and that all of the candidates who met objective, reasonable criteria were invited to participate.
- ✓ Prepare a forum agenda that covers a broad range of issues.

Again, the IRS has said (in a 1986 ruling) that “all legally-qualified candidates” must be invited to participate in candidate forums and debates.<sup>3</sup> However, such all-inclusive participation is not an absolute requirement. Under certain circumstances, a 501(c)(3) may exclude particular candidates from a forum, if they fail to meet reasonable, objective criteria established by the 501(c)(3) organization for participation in the event.

**The crucial factor in this regard is that 501(c)(3) organizations must develop reasonable, objective criteria for participation in candidate forums. Such criteria must be designed to further the educational purposes of the event and may not reflect any bias for or against particular views, beliefs or candidates.** These criteria, such as excluding candidates who have not garnered a specific target percentage in a recognized independent poll, must be established prior to planning the event. Such criteria may call for the exclusion of candidates deemed to lack viability, on the grounds that including such “fringe” candidates would hinder, rather than enhance, the educational value of the event. A candidate may only be excluded from a forum if he/she fails to meet such pre-determined objective criteria. In every case, the sponsoring organization must demonstrate that the candidate is not being excluded because of his/her beliefs or party affiliation.

**For example, Jewish community relations agencies, as instrumentalities of the Jewish community, have a right and an obligation to expose individuals or groups that foster anti-Semitism.** With respect to invitations to participate in candidate forums, no Jewish agency has an obligation to provide a platform to an anti-Semite or extremist advocating violence. However, if the person in question otherwise meets the criteria for inclusion in the forum, the organization will have to choose between either inviting the candidate, as noxious as the candidate's beliefs may be, or not holding the forum.

**Exclusions must be carefully considered in order to avoid any appearance of viewpoint-based bias,** which could lead to the conclusion that a 501(c)(3) is impermissibly intervening with or attempting to influence the outcome of a campaign. Selective representation, particularly during the heat of a campaign, might present a risk

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<sup>3</sup> Internal Revenue Service, 1986. <http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-tege/rr86-095.pdf>

that would justify re-examining the advisability of the congregation or organization holding such a forum. In addition to the legal issues, there are public relations concerns to consider as well. Inviting all the candidates running for a particular office avoids these difficulties.

**Finally, forums should cover a wide range of issues.** Focusing in on a limited number of issues, particularly where the views of the sponsoring 501(c)(3) are well-known (e.g. Jewish forums on Israel or anti-Semitism) would convey approval or disapproval of candidates and would likely run afoul of the IRS guidelines.

### ***Candidate Appearances Other Than Forums or Debates***

In general, during election season, it would be improper for 501(c)(3) organizations to sponsor non-forum events that feature a single candidate, or merely a select group of candidates. While there could be exceptions made for candidates who have particular expertise, are currently serving as elected officials and who are invited to speak solely in the capacity rather than as a candidate, such invitations should be avoided, particularly as an election nears. Should you wish to involve a candidate in an event other than a candidate forum conducted according to appropriate guidelines, please consult with your national organization's staff and your synagogue or organization's counsel.

*"Shemiah said: 'Shun authority.' Just what does this mean? That a man should not on his own place a crown upon his head. But others may do so."*

*Avot D'Rabbi Natan 11*

### ***Candidate Questionnaires***

Among the more difficult issues Jewish professionals face during the election season are those concerning the distribution of questionnaires to candidates and the dissemination of the data gleaned from the responses to the questionnaires. Please consult your national organization's staff and local counsel prior to sending such questionnaires to candidates.

In evaluating a questionnaire, its content is of paramount importance. Three factors should be considered above all:

- ✓ Neutrality
- ✓ Breadth of focus
- ✓ Distribution

**It is permissible to circulate an entirely neutral compilation of candidates' positions on a broad variety of issues, developed from a questionnaire mailed to all candidates.** Any questionnaire evincing a bias on certain issues or in favor of certain candidate(s) would be highly problematic.

## *Other Elections Resources for Nonprofit Organizations*

- ✓ **National Mail-In Voter Registration Form:**  
[http://www.eac.gov/voter\\_resources/register\\_to\\_vote.aspx](http://www.eac.gov/voter_resources/register_to_vote.aspx)
- ✓ **Preaching Politics From the Pulpit 2012: A Guide to the Internal Revenue Code Restrictions on the Political Activity of Religious Organizations.** Pew Research Center: <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/02/preaching-politics-from-the-pulpit-2012/>
- ✓ **The Rules of the Game: An Election Year Guide for Nonprofit Organizations, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.** By Gregory L. Colvin and Lowell Finley. Edited by Rosemary E. Fei, Laurence E. Gold and David A. Levitt. The Alliance for Justice:  
<http://bolderadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Rules-of-the-Game.pdf>.

# National Mail-In Voter Registration Materials

## ***National Mail-In Voter Registration Form***

If your state accepts the National Mail-In Voter Registration Form, you may photocopy the form and distribute it. You may also download the form from the [U.S. Election Assistance Commission website \(http://www.eac.gov/voter\\_resources/register\\_to\\_vote.aspx\)](http://www.eac.gov/voter_resources/register_to_vote.aspx).

After filling out this form, you must send it to a state or local election office for processing. See state specific instructions included in the form for additional information.

## ***National Mail-in Voter Registration Rules***

Filling out the National Mail-In Voter Registration Form is relatively simple, but there are a few items that vary from state to state. **Please note that these regulations change often, so you should check your state Board of Elections website or consult your local elected officials for the most current information.** You can also find state-specific instructions on the Election Assistance Commission's National Mail Voter Registration Form (see above).

- **Box 6—ID Number:** Almost every state requires an identification number of some kind, but the specific requirement varies. Some require a full Social Security number, some require only the last four digits and some require a driver's license or state ID number. For those states that require a driver's license or state ID number, citizens without a license or state ID must use the last four digits of their Social Security numbers.
- **Box 7—Choice of Party:** In some states, you must register with a party in order to vote in that party's primary election, caucus or convention. *Note:* If you do not register with a party, you can still vote in general elections and nonpartisan (nonparty) primary elections.
- **Box 8—Race or Ethnic Group:** ***Few states require this information, and it can never be used to deny registration.*** Some states require it to comply with the Voting Rights Act. Where it is required, use one of the following categories which best describes you:
  - ✓ *American Indian or Alaskan*
  - ✓ *Asian or Pacific Islander*
  - ✓ *Black (not of Hispanic origin)*
  - ✓ *Hispanic*
  - ✓ *Multi-racial*
  - ✓ *Native Hawaiian*
  - ✓ *White (not of Hispanic origin)*
  - ✓ *Other*
- **Box 9—Signature:** The information to which you swear/affirm varies widely from state to state. In general, it includes being: a citizen of the United States and a resident of the state; over the age of 18; mentally competent; and never having been convicted of a felony. See the **State Instructions** on the Elections Assistance



Commission website ([http://www.eac.gov/voter\\_resources/](http://www.eac.gov/voter_resources/)) to find out the rules in your state.

- **Proof of Identification:** If you are registering to vote for the first time in your jurisdiction and are mailing this registration application, you may be required to provide proof of identification the first time you vote. Depending on the specific requirements of your state, you may avoid providing identification at the polls when you vote for the first time by mailing a copy of an identification document together with this application. The list of acceptable documentation includes:
  - A COPY of a current and valid photo identification **OR**
  - A COPY of a current utility bill, bank statement, government check, paycheck or other government document that shows your name and address in the jurisdiction.