

DOs & DON'Ts

ELECTION 2008 EDITION

Guidelines for Religious Non-Profits

Religious organizations and other non-profits are granted a special 501(c)3 tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. With the granting of this status comes restrictions on the types of political activities in which religious entities can engage. As we enter the height of a very contentious election season, we want to be sure that all Reform Movement organizations and congregations are well informed of the rules governing election year activities. Below is a brief listing of permissible and impermissible political activities for synagogues and clergy. If you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact RAC Legislative Director Barbara Weinstein at bweinstein@rac.org or 202.387.2800.



PERMISSIBLE (& ENCOURAGED) ELECTION ACTIVITIES

Congregations and clergy, along with other nonprofit charitable organizations, MAY participate in public policy advocacy (lobbying) to a limited degree. This can include supporting or opposing legislation, ballot initiatives and other governmental actions. However, lobbying activities must be no more than an 'insubstantial' part of the total activity of the organization. Non-partisan civic engagement, such as voter registration and education, is not considered lobbying, and is not limited. Specifically:

- Congregations can take positions on public policy issues, including ballot initiatives and legislation, where their values are implicated. Activities such as public education campaigns, petitioning, joining coalitions and meeting with elected officials are acceptable. Such activities are considered lobbying.
- Congregations may organize non-partisan voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives.
- Congregations may host candidate forums/debates as long as all candidates meeting pre-set, objective and non-partisan criteria are invited. The forum must be for the purpose of public education, and the issues and format may not favor a particular candidate or party.
- Congregations may encourage voting by organizing non-partisan efforts to assist voters who face transportation challenges in getting to the polls; providing a drop-in babysitting service for parents with young children on Election Day; or establishing a phone chain the night before Election Day encouraging congregants to call 5 other members to remind them to vote.
- A synagogue may serve as an Election Day polling location.
- Congregations can encourage synagogue members to volunteer as poll workers on Election Day.

DON'T

IMPERMISSIBLE ELECTION ACTIVITIES

As a general rule, synagogues and clergy, acting in an official capacity, MAY NOT engage in activities on behalf of, or in opposition to, any particular party or candidate for office at any level of government. You must remain non-partisan; even the perceived appearance of partisanship can result in your 501(c)3 status being revoked. Specifically:

- Temples and clergy acting in an official capacity may not endorse candidates; for clergy, that extends to messages from the pulpit and bulletin articles.
- Congregations may not post signs favoring a party or candidate on their property.
- Religious organizations can not organize voter registration drives or get-out-the-vote efforts with the express purpose of electing a specific candidate or party.
- Congregations can not invite a candidate to speak during an election season without providing a comparable opportunity to other candidates. There are limited exceptions to this rule for elected officials currently holding office, but it is generally unadvisable.
- Congregations should not use their materials, space, or resources to aid a candidate's or a party's campaign.
- Religious organizations can not raise money for a political candidate or party.
- Religious organizations are not permitted to endorse their own members running for any office either expressly or by implication.
- Religious organizations can not provide membership lists to candidates, even if the candidate him or herself is a synagogue member.

The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism ("the RAC") is the Washington, DC, office of the Union for Reform Judaism (The Union) and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR). The RAC has been the hub of Jewish social justice and legislative activity in the nation's capital for more than 40 years. The RAC educates and mobilizes the American Jewish community on legislative and social concerns, advocating on issues from economic justice to civil rights to religious liberty to Israel.

The RAC's work is mandated by the Union, whose 900+ congregations across North America include 1.5 million Reform Jews, and the CCAR, whose membership includes more than 1,800 Reform rabbis. Representatives of these two organizations, as well as the Union's affiliates, comprise the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism (CSA) and govern the RAC's policy positions.



Religious Action Center
of Reform Judaism

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