



Election Season Messaging

This document has been created by Reconstructing Judaism and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association as a resource for our rabbis and congregations to help them navigate the waters of a potentially tumultuous American election season (Election Day to Inauguration Day). We hope that helping our rabbis and lay leaders to have a shared understanding of the limits and opportunities for faith communities and organizations in moments such as these, will empower us all to be the most effective messengers of our Reconstructionist Jewish values in the public square in this time of great need.

Part 1 - Suggested Messaging for Election Season:

The following messages are well within the guidelines for 501(c)(3) organizations and are aligned with the values of the Reconstructionist movement:

1) Prepare Communities for Election Week(s), Not Election Night.

1. In most of the world (and throughout history), ballot counting takes (and took) many days. Our expectations of immediate election results, heightened by social media, 24-hour news channels and fancy graphic displays, are not realistic. It often takes time to count votes and determine results, and some states will be tallying received ballots for several days after November 3rd. A delay isn't a sign of a problem, it's a sign of normalcy and the integrity of the process.

2. Close elections are nothing new. Results change as votes are processed and counted. That's why state and federal laws address post-election disputes. If and when they are used, it proves that the system is working.

3. Media reports will be filled with guesswork and speculation that draw on exit polling to fill air time. Keep people focused on official results and information from sources like election administrators, Secretaries of State offices and other such reliable sources. Data for Progress has created the [Election Night Integrity Project](#) to enable viewers to see realtime and actual vote counts.

2) Judaism thrives best in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious democracy. Fighting for Democracy is a Jewish imperative.

Mordecai Kaplan taught that “where there is no diversity, there is no freedom.” Our ability to live freely and thrive in the United States depends thoroughly on other people’s ability to do the same. And only in a fully constituted democracy, where people have the ability to choose their leaders and, when necessary, to remove them from office, can such diversity and freedom flourish.

As Reconstructionists, we take our responsibility for living in both the Jewish and American civilizations (and the many others to which we as individuals may belong) seriously. Voting, and ensuring a healthy democracy, are Jewish imperatives. Reconstructionism in particular stresses the sacred place of democracy in human society. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan wrote that “democracy must be given the sanction of religion” and that “every deviation from democracy is fraught with evil consequence and every achievement of true democracy is a moral gain.” (*The Future of the American Jew*)

In this moment of rising antisemitism and political unrest, it is natural for Jewish community members to be anxious about personal and institutional safety in the coming weeks. We take this moment to reiterate our understanding that our freedom and safety in America is dependent on the freedom and safety for all individuals and communities in this country. Using examples of or inciting antisemitism as a way to force Jews into a position of insularity and self-protectiveness is a tactic that has been used by reactionary and anti-democratic groups to divide us from our natural allies and partners.

We urge our communities and leaders to highlight the value of joining together across differences for the sake of our common good. We believe that Jewish voters will in fact both feel and experience greater safety when they have deep and authentic relationships with others across lines of difference. We recommend messages such as the following when speaking to your community:

- “We’ll stand together with anyone targeted for our differences and/or prevented from exercising our constitutional rights to vote and to protest”
- “Freedom and safety for any of us depends on freedom and safety for all of us.”
- “Whenever certain politicians target us and others based on our religion, race, or zip code, their goal is to keep us from working together to win the things we all need to thrive.”

3) Free and Fair Elections are a Human Right.

According to the National Task Force on Election Crises¹, six key elements are required for a fair election:

1. A free and fair election is understood as a nonpartisan issue.
2. All eligible voters are able to vote and have their votes counted.
3. The election is conducted in a manner that is consistent with the law of the land.
4. Voters have access to timely, accurate facts about the election.
5. Officials are given time to count all votes cast, including absentee and mail-in ballots. (Americans are utilizing these methods at higher rates than ever due to increased precautions related to COVID-19.)
6. People, including politicians, avoid making bad faith, unsubstantiated claims about “rigging” or “stealing” the election.

It is crucial for us to name these elements of a free and fair election loudly and unequivocally, as disinformation about the election is already spreading. We all must share timely and accurate information to counter these efforts. [You can share this social media graphic series from the Foundation for Living Torah’s Free & Fair project with your community members.](#) People respond well to affirmative, reassuring messages from trusted voices. Such messages help boost the solidarity and mutual trust in communities, which can help keep hate and conspiracy theories from taking hold.

4) Emphasize Safety.

Preparing for a tumultuous election season is a reasonable precaution to take and a productive channeling of anxious energy. We hope that there will be no violence, but we must be prepared for any eventuality.

Messages should acknowledge – but not trigger – Jewish audiences’ fears. Fear is fundamentally paralyzing and de-motivating. This is why fear works well for politicians hoping to win over undecided voters while suppressing votes among their opponents. It is critical that we not aid in this strategy.

- Messages should focus on working for positive outcomes and stories of partnerships overcoming challenges rather than the challenges themselves.

¹ The [National Task Force on Election Crisis](#) is made up of a diverse cross-partisan group of more than 50 experts in election law, election administration, national security, cybersecurity, voting rights, civil rights, technology, media, public health, and emergency response. It is a trustworthy source of information about election law, ballot counting, and other important issues. Use their [resources](#) in helping to communicate with your communities.

- Using “safety” instead of “security” evokes a broader set of personal, familial and communal states and avoids suggesting policed or militarized solutions.

Part 2 - Guidance on 501(c)(3) Restrictions and Opportunities:

“Under the Internal Revenue Code, all section 501(c)(3) organizations are prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for elective public office. Violating this prohibition may result in denial or revocation of tax-exempt status and the imposition of certain excise taxes.” (From [IRS.gov](https://www.irs.gov))

Synagogues and other religious organizations are organized as 501(c)(3) entities, and are thus prohibited from engaging in political campaigns and partisan projects. Violations of this rule can result in the loss of tax exempt status. This means that synagogues cannot endorse, campaign for, donate to or advocate that their members vote for or against any particular candidate for public office. (In some states, this restriction extends to ballot initiatives as well.)

This does not mean that synagogues and religious organizations cannot speak in the public square about issues of public concern. Speaking out or acting in accordance with a community’s deeply held values in the public square is a legitimate and legal action on the part of religious and spiritual organizations.

Don't	Do
Be partisan - partisan means supporting candidates or parties for public office. While individuals (including clergy) may act out of partisan commitments or beliefs as individuals, this is forbidden when representing a 501(c)3 institution.	Engage in the political process. We are political beings; politics is the way humans negotiate differences of opinion and viewpoints.
Endorse a candidate for office as a synagogue, board, organization, etc.	Do speak out on issues of concern to your community (e.g., immigration rights, voting rights, racial and social justice issues).
Place yard signs for candidates or ballot initiatives on synagogue property.	Encourage people to vote through non-partisan “Get Out the Vote” efforts.

Collect money from members to donate to a particular political candidate.	Invite speakers on various issues to your community and advocate for support of their organizations.
Invite one candidate to speak to your community from the bimah.	Invite all candidates (or their representatives) for a Candidates' Forum, and invite the public.
Speak publicly as a representative of your community without first having had conversations with other leaders to determine shared values and positions on issues and community perspectives on advocacy.	Have deep and meaningful conversations within your community about risk taking, standing up for what you believe in and developing a shared understanding of what values you will publicly speak out on together.

Important note: Just because something is legal, doesn't always mean it is wise or ethical. Synagogue leaders - both lay and professional - should take every opportunity to clarify an organization's message. Although individual actors may have differing opinions, and all are free to express themselves on their own, collective messaging on elections requires collective discernment and care.

No one can know at this time what may happen on election day and afterward. Reconstructing Judaism will monitor events and remain in contact as events develop.

We're all in this together.

*Blessed are You, Adonai our God, who gives us freedom, justice, and the power to choose our leaders.*²

² <https://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/election-day-blessing>