



# The Reform Jewish Students' Guide to Civic Engagement





# Introduction to Civic Engagement for Reform Jewish Students

**As Reform Jews, we believe democracy is strongest when everyone participates—and it suffers when citizens are shut out from the democratic process or choose not to engage.**

Nonpartisan civic engagement work is one way that we fulfill the sacred mandate of tikkun olam, world repair, and ensure that our enduring values are represented in the public square.

To realize our goal of building a more just and compassionate world, Every Voice, Every Vote: The Reform Movement's 2020 Civic Engagement Campaign will encourage all U.S. citizens to exercise their right to vote, and work to break down obstacles that shut some out of the voting booth.

This campaign seeks to mobilize the entire Reform Jewish community—be it through a Hillel, congregation, a NFTY region, sisterhood, a camp community, or campus activism. We know our Movement is strongest when we act together.

If you believe that civic engagement is important for the Jewish community, we want you with us.

Use this student civic engagement toolkit to learn how you can become involved in meaningful, Jewish, nonpartisan civic engagement in 2020.

## **A Note about COVID-19 and Its Impact on Civic Engagement Work: Every Voice, Every Vote:**

The Reform Movement's 2020 Civic Engagement Campaign has been planned for two years. But over the past few weeks, we've witnessed North America and the world change in ways we never could have expected.

COVID-19 has spread through cities and towns, sown uncertainty and fear within our communities, and forced widespread social distancing. Our current circumstances highlight the critical role that elected officials play at every level of government. Their leadership matters more than ever during challenging times such as this one. Elections are the opportunity to select the people who not only determine the policies that we care about, but also serve as the civic leaders we turn to in moments of crisis. In light of this, our civic engagement work is more urgent than ever. This toolkit was built to provide a range of tools for Reform Jewish communities to facilitate civic engagement and bolster voter turnout in all communities. Some of the recommendations in this resource require or suggest in-person communication and contact. While we hope that this becomes possible between now and November, you should always follow the guidance of public health officials and abide by any "shelter in place" or social distancing guidance.

Many parts of civic engagement work can easily be done from home, including phone and text banking, and relational organizing using the Empower app. The RAC already provides much of its civic engagement training and resources virtually, through webinars and content on our website. We have also made our pledge cards digital this year. As we move into an unknown future together, we encourage you and members of your community to utilize this resource to the best of your ability, be creative and constructive, adapt its concepts and core goals, and look forward to a world in which the opportunities in this toolkit reflect the reality we're in—one where we can be together in person to support and encourage one another and where exercising the right to vote is an exciting demonstration of agency to secure a better, more just world for everyone.

We're here to help.

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# Why should I be civically engaged?

Rabbi Hillel famously taught, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?” (*Pirkei Avot* 1:14)

When we regard this text as Jews and Americans, it is clear we have the obligation and ability to answer Hillel’s questions through these identities. As Americans, we have the right to vote to freely express our opinions on issues we value. As Jews, we are expected to speak out and take action to improve the state of the world through *tikkun olam*. When we are given the opportunity to make change through our vote, we must take it. To ensure that our Jewish community is committed to social justice, we must civically engage at this crucial moment.

In the 2016 presidential election, [less than half of eligible young voters](#) came out to the polls. Most young people who did not participate in the election reported that the main reasons they did not vote were because they believed that their vote didn’t count and that politics was not relevant to their lives.

We disagree.

Judaism teaches us that each individual has the potential to be an agent of change. Voting, empowering others to vote, and making your voice heard are all ways to be an agent of change and make elections relevant for your peers. Our current circumstances highlight the critical role that elected officials play at every level of government. Their leadership matters more than ever. Elections are an opportunity to not only select the civic leaders who determine policies that impact our lives, but to pick the civic leaders we turn to in moments of crisis. Our civic duty also extends beyond our own self-interest; we make our vote count more when we show up while bringing our community with us.

## ■ Terms to Know

- **Civic engagement** is the act of everyday citizens working to better a community through social justice work and political activism.
- **Voter registration** is a requirement in most states for people eligible to vote before they may cast their ballot. This often takes place through state government websites, in person at voter registration centers, or in advance by mail.
- **Preregistration** is an election procedure that allows people under the age of 18 (16 or 17 years old, depending on the state) to register to vote in advance of reaching legal voting age.
- The **primary election** is the election that determines which candidates will be placed on the ballot for the general election later in the year.
- The **general election** is the election in which candidates are elected into office.
- The **presidential election** is the election in which US citizens vote for the electors who will vote to determine the President and Vice President of the United States (through the Electoral College).

- **Midterm elections** are elections in which US citizens vote for their Congresspeople, either their Representatives (who have two year terms) and/or their Senators (who have six year terms) depending on the year.
- **Ballot measures** are questions or issues that appear on ballots for voters to approve or reject.
- **Ballot initiatives** are petitions that will bring about a public vote on a bill or constitutional amendment if a certain minimum number of registered voters sign them.
- **Absentee voting** or **vote-by-mail** is for voters who are not able to go to the polls or prefer to vote remotely. These voters may mail in their ballots before Election Day. Some states require a reason to vote by absentee ballot while others do not.
- **Down ballot** refers to the election of local offices and ballot measures located further down on the physical ballot than elections for president, senators, and representatives, and are often ignored or overlooked by voters.

*Definitions from The New York Times, USA.gov, National Conference of State Legislatures, and Vote.org.*



# Commonly Asked Questions

## ■ When do I vote?

There are numerous opportunities to vote, including primaries, midterm elections, presidential elections, and local elections determined by your state and county. Generally, the primaries are in the spring and summer and the general elections (midterm and presidential) are in November of that same year. Additionally, special elections may occur at any time whenever a governmental position requiring voting is unexpectedly vacated. You can find your next election by [checking your state's elections website](#).

## ■ When can I pre-register to vote if I'm under 18-years-old?

In California, Colorado, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Hawaii, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, Utah, and Washington, 16-year-olds can pre-register at any time to vote!

In Iowa, Maine, Nevada, New Jersey, and West Virginia, you can pre-register once you turn 17-years-old.

Other states and territories have diverse laws regarding pre-registration. [You can find more information on pre-registration age requirements in your state from our partners at The Civics Center](#).

## ■ Now that I know I can pre-register, how do I do so?

For a physical registration form, go to any registered polling area in your state and simply ask for one; the registrars will be overjoyed to provide a form. In a total of 39 states and the District of Columbia, [you can save some paper and register online](#).

## ■ Where can I find information specific to my state?

Each state has different laws regarding voting, especially around voter registration and voter registration drives. Below is a list of resources to access specific information about the state where you plan to do voter engagement work:

- **National Voter Registration Day's Rules for Voter Registration Drives in your State:** Each state resource includes links to obtain state-specific voter registration forms, regulations for handling registration forms, and other pertinent state laws for conducting voter registration drives. If you complete the training with the Civics Center, you will get customized access to the tools and rules for your state.
- **Fair Elections Center's State Specific Guides:** Each state guide summarizes important registration and voting information for each state, including deadlines, voter ID requirements, polling place locators, options to cast a ballot, and student-specific voting information.



- **Nonprofit Vote's Voting in your State: A 50 State Guide:** Access current state-specific voting information including eligibility, how to register and check your registration status, upcoming deadlines, and more.
- **Voting by Mail:** Learn your state's laws around registering and voting by mail, which is especially relevant when working with college students, by scrolling down to the "jump directly to your state" section of the website.
- **Nonprofit Vote's Voting in your State Resource Library:** This resource library includes information regarding state-specific laws around voting with a disability, voting and homelessness, voting privacy and domestic violence, and voting with a past felony conviction.

### ■ **How can I check if I am registered to vote?**

You can check to see if you are registered to [vote here](#). Depending on your state, you may need to enter your date of birth, county, and other identifying information. You can also check your registration by calling your local election office.

### ■ **I just moved. Do I need to re-register?**

If you have changed your address or name or want to change your political party, you must re-register to vote. When you send in a new voter registration form, there is a place to indicate that you are changing your address. You do not need to "un-register" your previous registration. If you've moved recently, there's a chance that you'd been removed from the voter rolls. To be safe, it's always good practice to [check to see if you are registered to vote](#).

### ■ **If I didn't vote in the last election, do I need to register again?**

No. Even if you did not vote in the last election, you are still registered and do not need to register again. If you voted in the last election and have since moved, see the question above.

### ■ **Can I register to vote using my school's address? Can I use a P.O. box address or a school mailbox address as my permanent address?**

Yes. Even if you were previously registered at your home address, you can register using your school address, including if you are living in a dorm room. However, you cannot use a P.O. box as your permanent address. Instead, list the street address of your dorm and specify the floor or apartment you occupy.

### ■ **What kind of identification do I need to vote?**

About 30 states have voter ID laws, and half of these require a photo ID. The majority of photo ID states allow voters without the correct ID to vote with a provisional ballot or sign an affidavit and vote with a regular ballot. Some states also ask for some form of ID from first time voters who vote in person. You can find your state's voter ID laws by using resources from the Voting in Your State section of this toolkit.

## ■ How do I vote?

When it's Election Day, locate your local polling place or abide by your state's voting policies. In some states, you can mail in your ballot. Visit [vote411.org](https://vote411.org) to look at the election policies in your state. If you are not going to be in your state, you can request a vote by mail ballot. Each state has rules on who can take part. In some states, you may cast a ballot in person before Election Day. To do this, you must request an a ballot from your state, which may require you to submit a valid excuse. Most states also have early voting, which allows people to vote on specified dates prior to Election Day. [Click here to view early voting times in different states.](#) Each state has different rules, so make sure you know your state's policies if you plan to vote early or by mail. The best place to check is your state/territorial election office website. Check under "absentee voting" if you don't see information listed under "voting in person" or "early voting."

## ■ How do I find out where to vote?

To find your polling place, you can contact your local elections office. In most states, you can also research this information online. Tools can be found in the Voting in Your State section of this toolkit.

## ■ How can I vote by mail?

Generally, as long as a vote by mail ballot is postmarked by Election Day, it will be counted. However, in some states, the deadline for applying for a vote by mail ballot is a few weeks prior to Election Day. You can find information about voting by mail by using [this resource from Vote.org](#) or the government's [Voting Assistance Guide](#).

## ■ Do I have to vote for the party I'm registered with?

Your state may give you the opportunity to state your political party affiliation on your voter registration card. You do not have to vote for the party you're registered with in a federal, state, or local general election; however, in a presidential primary or caucus, depending on your state's rules, you may have to vote for a candidate from the political party you have registered with.

## ■ Can I help get out the vote with my peers?

Yes.

# Voter Turnout

Registering yourself and others to vote is only a first step: a registered voter is not a guaranteed voter. In the 2016 election, nearly 40 percent of the 231 million eligible voters in the U.S. did not cast ballots.<sup>12</sup> Many registered voters still lack the confidence, knowledge, and habit of voting to actually participate in a given election. With some support, education, and encouragement, people are more likely to vote. When you encourage one person to vote, you increase the likelihood that others in their family or friend group will vote. Studies have also shown that voting is habit forming; casting a ballot for the first or second time can instill a lifelong voting habit.<sup>13</sup>

Reform Jewish communities can help ensure the voices and values of their community members are heard at the polls by leading turnout efforts, including educating voters on the voting process, encouraging them to vote, and ensuring they have a voting plan.

## ■ Principles to guide voter turnout efforts

*The more personal, the better:* The messenger matters. Voter mobilization research shows that people are more likely to participate when contacted personally, including by people associated with groups they trust -- like your Reform Jewish community.<sup>14</sup> This is why the most effective get out the vote tactics are those that maximize human interaction and foster a sense of community and personal connection, whether face-to-face or over the phone.<sup>15</sup> This is also why once you reach one voter, your message is likely to spread and influence at least one additional person in their family or friend group.

*Repeated contact makes the difference:* Personal contact with a voter should occur multiple times. Studies show that phone calls from people who contact the same potential voters twice are especially effective at creating committed voters.<sup>16</sup> Keep in mind that attempting to contact a voter is different from actually doing so, meaning calling and getting a voicemail message does not count as a contact. Your voter turnout efforts should involve a plan to reach voters multiple times. For example: Your first contact could be meeting someone at a voter registration table and having them sign a physical voter pledge card or [fill out a virtual pledge card](#) on a computer or phone, your second contact could involve speaking to them during a phone bank, your third contact could be asking if they have a voting plan, and your fourth and final contact could be texting them right before Election Day reminding them to vote.

*Keep track of who you contact:* From the start of your civic engagement work, keep track of every person you contact, the method by which you contact them, and the result. This enables you to reach people who haven't yet been contacted and follow up with people you already contacted so that you have sustained communication with them. One way to do this is with the [Empower app](#), a platform designed to engage voters. You could also use a shareable spreadsheet or database (using software such as Microsoft Excel or Google Drive) to easily enter information about each contact.

*Make sure voters know when and where to vote:* Many first-time voters are excited to participate but aren't confident about where, when, and how to vote, including what will be on the ballot. By educating voters, your Reform Jewish community can help demystify the voting process,

remove participation barriers, and instill confidence in voters—all of which helps increase voter turnout.

*Timing is important:* Voter turnout efforts have the greatest impact in the final weeks and days leading up to an election when there is peak citizen interest, especially from potential voters who are less likely to turn out.<sup>17</sup> During the two to three weeks before an election, your community's strong encouragement of voting will help make people more likely to vote.<sup>18</sup> You can contact voters before this period to prime the pump, but the early contact will only be effective if there is follow-up during the final days and weeks before the election. States that allow early voting options require earlier voter outreach – you don't want to confine your voter outreach to the week before an election if a significant number of voters will have already voted through early voting options or a vote by mail ballot.

*Use messages that work:* Though research shows that it is often the messenger rather than the message that drives people to the polls, you should still use messages that have been proven to be effective. It is hard to hold the attention of potential voters for more than a few moments, so it is best to stick to a single message that is brief, accessible, and memorable, rather than trying to incorporate too many messages into a single phone call or email:<sup>19</sup>

- **Social pressure and accountability:** Experiments have shown that the decision to vote is strongly shaped by someone's social environment and that social pressure is one of the most reliable messages for voter turnout. People want to be praised for doing the "correct" thing (in this case, voting) and to avoid being "punished" for failing to do so.<sup>20</sup> Social pressure makes voters feel that they will be held accountable for their actions. One example of a gentle social pressure tactic is to show people that others like themselves have committed to vote.<sup>21</sup> In addition to saying this over the phone, show a list of committed voters in your community on a bulletin board or in your service booklet at Shabbat. You can also have people sign a banner in the lobby to show that they have pledged to vote.
- **Making a commitment:** Making a commitment is the first step to keeping a commitment. One way to help increase the accountability of voters to themselves, friends, family, and your Reform Jewish community is by asking people to fill out a voter pledge card.<sup>22</sup> The campaign has created [a voting pledge](#) for Reform Jewish communities.
- **Creating a voting plan:** People are more likely to vote if they visualize their plan to do so and share that plan with another person.<sup>23</sup> Close to the election, ask people to talk through the logistics of when, where, and how they will vote. Ask questions such as, "Will you be voting by mail, early, or on Election Day?", "Where will you be coming from?", "How will you get there?", and "What time do you plan to vote?"<sup>24</sup> This is an easy conversation to have and will help ensure that the voter is confident about the process.
- **Reasons for voting:** New voters often look for reasons why they should vote, and it can also be helpful when mobilizing voters to have them explain their reasons for voting.<sup>25</sup> Share your own story of why voting is important. When working with your Reform Jewish community, cite reasons that connect voting to Jewish text and tradition and to your community's efforts, which can be found in [this resource created by Reform Movement rabbis](#). You can also find reasons for voting in the sample call script for phone banks.

- Positivity: Negative messaging such as, “If you don’t vote, you can’t complain,” can be counterproductive.<sup>26</sup> Use positive messages that encourage and motivate people to vote, which can include connecting the election back to its importance to your Reform Jewish community or community at large.

*Staying Nonpartisan:* As a 501(c)(3) organization, The Religious Action Center’s civic engagement work is nonpartisan, and it is important that your Reform Jewish community also remains nonpartisan while doing voter registration and engagement work, regardless of its legal status. For more information and general guidelines, refer to the Reform Movement’s [“The Do’s and Don’ts of Civic Engagement Work: Rules for Non-Profits”](#) resource.

Keeping the principles above in mind, including the need for multiple contacts rooted in real interaction, below are some suggestions for ways your Reform Jewish community can increase voter turnout:

- Organize a voter phone bank.
- Organize a voter text messaging bank to voters with whom you have already engaged.
- Have voters sign voter pledge cards, call the signers, and then mail the cards to them right before the election. The RAC has made [a virtual pledge card](#) with instructions for your community to use.
- Talk to people in your community about voting where they already are (e.g. before or after services, at youth group events, or during homeroom).
- Though email is the least effective voter outreach method when used alone, it can be useful as a supplement to other more interactive voter engagement methods. Send reminders about the upcoming election, information about the voting process, and sample ballots to your congregation or school by email or physical mail.
- Run an educational program on the importance of civic engagement and its connection to Judaism, and have people create voting plans and sign voter pledge cards. A sample program for youth can be found on [the Reform Movement’s Engaging Student Voters Page](#).
- If your community runs a regular Torah or text study group, consider devoting one session to the importance of civic engagement and its connection to Judaism. Use [this resource created by Reform Movement rabbis](#) to help.
- Talk about pledging to vote and create and share individual voting plans at meetings in your Reform Jewish community.
- In addition to contacting voters, create a webpage on your congregation or school’s website with information that voters are seeking prior to the election.
- Use social media, your newsletter/school paper, or flyers to spread information about the election and voting to enhance your more personal voter engagement efforts. The RAC has put together [social media recommendations](#) for civic engagement work to help.
- Organize a group of volunteers to help drive people to their polling places on Election Day.
- Create a “voter honor roll” for your community for people to sign after they vote. Display it proudly.

- On Election Day, have people take pictures with this printable [“I am a Reform Jew and I vote because”](#) signs, post them on social media using #ReformJewsVote, and use these [shareable graphics](#). These resources and additional sample [social media posts and tips](#) can be found here.
- If you anticipate many people will be voting by mail, host a virtual party where everyone applies for a vote by mail ballot. Two weeks later, have a follow up virtual party where everyone (privately) fills out their ballot. Have everyone commit to drop the ballot in the mail. During this virtual celebration, have one or two people on deck to share why they are voting.
- On Election Day, [hold a party or festival](#) either in person or virtually.
- On the Shabbat before the election, ask the service leader in your community to invite new voters up to the *bima* for a special blessing. There can also be other blessings or readings for all voters.

Your Reform Jewish community's voter engagement plan should include more than one of these tactics. Make sure the main emphasis of your work is to have conversations in person or by text or phone with the people you want to turn out to vote. Less interactive voter engagement methods should be supplemental, rather than the primary way you do outreach. The main conversations should take place in the weeks before the election, and you should have a separate plan to remind everyone with whom you engaged, and those you haven't been able to reach, about voting during the few days before the election. The plan for the few days leading up to Election Day is called Get Out the Vote (GOTV).

# Using the Empower app

The Empower app is a tool that helps leaders like you leverage their personal relationships to build power and turn out the vote. By using relational organizing, the Jewish community has huge potential to support members of our communities in getting to the polls. In addition to contact with a voter being personal, it also should be done multiple times. Studies show that phone banks from which callers contact the same potential voters multiple times are especially effective in creating committed voters.<sup>27</sup> This tool helps volunteers prioritize who they're contacting about voting, organizes information about each contact, and provides prompts for conversations to have with these contacts to ensure they are contacted multiple times about voting. Sign up today by clicking on the location where you live: [California](#), [Florida](#), [Illinois](#), [New Jersey](#), [New York](#), [Ohio](#), [Pennsylvania](#), [Texas](#), or [any other state](#)!



# Want to get involved?

Your best option is to get involved in [Every Voice, Every Vote: The Reform Movement's 2020 Civic Engagement Campaign](#). Host educational programs, register voters, use the Empower app, and become one of the student leaders ensuring we get out the vote in a big way in 2020!

You can also volunteer with voter registration and civic engagement-focused organizations like the Civics Center, an organization dedicated to building the foundations of youth civic engagement and voter participation in high schools through education, organizing, and advocacy. They encourage student-led, peer-to-peer voter registration and preregistration efforts through direct outreach to high school communities.

The Reform Movement's 2020 Civic Engagement Campaign has partnered with the Civics Center to bring their resources together with our Jewish values and community to provide you with voter registration and get out the vote resources and materials tailored to our campaign. Together, Every Voice, Every Vote and the Civics Center will provide voter registration workshops, resources for programming, and the connection we need to reach our goal of 100% Reform Movement voter turnout and boosted turnout in our communities.

Through our partnership with the Civics Center, you can:

- Run voter registration drives in your synagogue and school.
- Get your congregation and classmates involved in voter registration.
- Talk with your administration about ways to educate your classmates.
- Get the word out so folks are prepared for your registration event.

Participate in National Voter Registration Day (September 22, 2020) and High School Voter Registration Week.

# Let the RAC Know About Your Voter Engagement Efforts

We are most powerful when we work together, and with the full force of the Reform Movement behind this Civic Engagement Campaign, our impact grows exponentially. We want to celebrate your community's work and make sure it is counted as part of our Movement's overall efforts. Let us know about your voter engagement efforts by [submitting this short form](#).

## Questions?

Explore the Civic Engagement Campaign website at [RAC.org/cec](https://rac.org/cec) and be sure to check out the Engaging Student Voters page for resources, upcoming trainings, and the best way to contact the leaders of the campaign.





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