



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION OF CONGREGATIONS

Advocacy and Witness Programs

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## Faithful Democracy: Unitarian Universalists and the 2008 Elections

*"There is work to be done. I'm not talking about simply affirming the importance of voting, nor of simply promising to vote ourselves. I'm talking about mobilizing to get out there and work to prevent the travesties of recent elections from recurring. We want to see this nation's promise of democracy restored, and to do what we can to ensure that everyone's vote gets counted."*

--Rev. William G. Sinkford  
President, Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction_____	2
IRS Guidelines and Election Activities_____	3
Election Activities for your Congregation or Campus Ministry	
A. Voter Registration_____	5
B. Voter Education_____	8
C. Voter Mobilization (GOTV!)_____	9
D. Voter Advocacy and Empowerment_____	10
Sample Campaign Calendar_____	10
Resources_____	11
Pledge to Vote Sign-Up Sheet_____	12

### Did you know that...

**The overwhelming majority of people who are registered *do* vote!**

According to the US Census Bureau, the likelihood that an individual will actually vote once registered has remained high since the peak at 91 percent in 1968. In the 2004 elections, over 88% of those registered went to the polls!

## INTRODUCTION

The 2008 election provides a tremendous opportunity to engage and inspire people. Record numbers of voters participated in this year's primary elections. Let's build on that momentum so even more people can--and do!—participate in our nation's democratic process!

In 2004, hundreds of Unitarian Universalist congregations participated in voter registration and Get-Out-The-Vote activities. Youth groups registered classmates at high schools and did outreach at local malls. Small and large congregations alike held community forums and partnered with community organizations to educate and mobilize voters. Congregations even rented buses to transport voters to the polls!

**“Voting is a civic sacrament.”**

*--Theodore Hesburgh*

This work led to lasting partnerships between many Unitarian Universalist congregations and the community groups. It raised the profile and increased the relevance of Unitarian Universalism. We can do even more in 2008! We can demonstrate our commitment to democracy and justice by helping to bring more diverse voices into the public arena and shape the debate on key issues.

Religious individuals and groups play a prophetic role in public life by calling attention to oppression, demanding change, and holding leaders and institutions accountable for their actions and policies. Congregations and people of faith can also help counter cynicism and distrust of the electoral process. The Constitutional separation of religion and state (and related Internal Revenue Service regulations) protects the integrity of religious and political institutions. While religious organizations must remain strictly nonpartisan, there are many activities that any religious group can do without jeopardizing its nonprofit tax-exempt status. Unitarian Universalist congregations and campus groups can legally register, educate, and mobilize voters for the 2008 election.

This resource has been compiled by the Unitarian Universalist Association's Washington Office for Advocacy and Office of Congregational Advocacy and Witness to help congregations do effective and responsible election-related work, with a focus on registration, education, and mobilization. Other resources for congregational social justice work are available at [www.uua.org/socialjustice](http://www.uua.org/socialjustice).

The Unitarian Universalist Association is proud to be a part of the national, interfaith coalition Faithful Democracy ([www.faithfuldemocracy.org](http://www.faithfuldemocracy.org)). Founded in part by the UUA in 2004 to increase civic participation, Faithful Democracy has a strong web presence, valuable resources, and a commitment to turning out the vote in 2008.

## IRS GUIDELINES AND ELECTION ACTIVITIES

Congregations, like other 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations, must follow certain IRS guidelines in order to maintain tax-exempt status. Notably, these organizations must limit their lobbying activities and “may not participate in, or intervene in... any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.”<sup>1</sup>

There are many activities that any religious group can do to promote equality, justice, and voter participation without jeopardizing its nonprofit tax-exempt status. The list below is intended to provide a simple summary of what’s acceptable—or not. **Congregations are strongly encouraged to use *The Real Rules: Congregations and the IRS Guidelines on Advocacy, Lobbying, and Elections*** (see [www.uua.org/socialjustice](http://www.uua.org/socialjustice)) to learn more about the restrictions relevant to the activities listed below.

### **Congregations and Religious Leaders May, With Certain Restrictions:**

- Conduct issue advocacy to educate and mobilize the public on issues of concern
- Conduct limited lobbying activity (defined by the IRS as “attempting to influence legislation”), including work on ballot measures
- Educate the public about their voting rights
- Conduct nonpartisan voter education, registration and get-out-the-vote drives. Some commentators suggest that it is acceptable for nonprofits to focus their efforts in nonpartisan ways, such as on low-turnout areas, low-income populations, minority populations, students and/or the areas or people they serve.
- Educate candidates on issues of concern to the congregation
- Sponsor candidate forums/debates
- Prepare and/or distribute nonpartisan candidate questionnaires and voter guides
- Make congregational resources, such as facilities, available on an equal basis to candidates, parties, and/or political organizations
- Conduct poll monitoring to ensure that voting rights are respected
- Encourage and assist voters to get to the polls on Election Day

### **Congregations and Religious Leaders May Not:**

- Endorse or promote candidates or parties, such as by making statements in congregational publications or at events, distributing campaign literature, posting campaign signs on congregational property, etc.
- Increase the level of incumbent criticism as election time approaches
- Solicit or make campaign contributions
- Discriminate in how congregational resources are made available to different candidates or parties
- Coordinate voter registration, GOTV campaigns or other electoral activities with any political party or partisan organization

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<sup>1</sup> IRS Revenue Ruling 2007-41, 2007-25 I.R.B. (June 18, 2007), p. 1.

**Please Note:** The restrictions described here apply only to a congregation as a legal entity, or to a person or group speaking in the name of the congregation. A minister or congregation member may freely make partisan statements as an individual.

## **Issue Advocacy vs. Political Campaign Intervention<sup>2</sup>**

Section 501(c)(3) organizations may take positions on public policy issues, including issues that divide candidates in an election for public office. However, section 501(c)(3) organizations must avoid any issue advocacy that functions as political campaign intervention. Even if a statement does not expressly tell an audience to vote for or against a specific candidate, an organization delivering the statement is at risk of violating the political campaign intervention prohibition if there is any message favoring or opposing a candidate. A statement can identify a candidate not only by stating the candidate's name but also by other means such as showing a picture of the candidate, referring to political party affiliations, or other distinctive features of a candidate's platform or biography. All the facts and circumstances need to be considered to determine if the advocacy is political campaign intervention.

Key factors in determining whether a communication results in political campaign intervention include the following:

- Whether the statement identifies one or more candidates for a given public office;
- Whether the statement expresses approval or disapproval for one or more candidates' positions and/or actions;
- Whether the statement is delivered close in time to the election;
- Whether the statement makes reference to voting or an election;
- Whether the issue addressed in the communication has been raised as an issue distinguishing candidates for a given office;
- Whether the communication is part of an ongoing series of communications by the organization on the same issue that are made independent of the timing of any election; and
- Whether the timing of the communication and identification of the candidate are related to a non-electoral event such as a scheduled vote on specific legislation by an officeholder who also happens to be a candidate for public office.

A communication is particularly at risk of political campaign intervention when it makes reference to candidates or voting in a specific upcoming election. Nevertheless, the communication must still be considered in context before arriving at any conclusions.

**Important Disclaimer: This resource is not intended to be formal legal advice; nor should it be used in place of legal counsel.** Please consult *The Real Rules: Congregations and the IRS Guidelines on Advocacy, Lobbying, and Elections* for more specific guidance.

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<sup>2</sup> IRS Revenue Ruling 2007-41, 2007-25 I.R.B. (June 18, 2007), p. 8-10.

## ELECTION ACTIVITIES FOR YOUR CONGREGATION OR CAMPUS MINISTRY

While organizing is never exactly the same in different contexts, the following steps will likely be helpful in organizing and implementing your election year program. Good luck!

### A. VOTER REGISTRATION

#### 1. Get Started

- Create a Leadership Core.** Identify 2-3 people with the energy, skills, and commitment to take a lead role in this work. This group will work closely with the appropriate congregational leaders (minister(s), other staff, board, etc) to guide and manage the overall effort. These core leaders will recruit a larger committee of volunteers to take responsibility for various aspects of the campaign.
- Educate Yourself**
  - ★ Review *The Real Rules: Congregations and IRS Guidelines on Advocacy, Lobbying, and Elections*, available from the UUA at [www.uua.org/socialjustice](http://www.uua.org/socialjustice).
  - ★ Learn about the Legal Guidelines, Registration Procedures and Deadlines for your state. For basic information about registration, visit [www.votesmart.org](http://www.votesmart.org). For comprehensive third-party voter registration guides for all 50 states and the District of Columbia, see <http://866ourvote.org>.
- Encourage Your Minister (and/or other key leaders) to Get Involved** in your efforts. Ask for announcements about your voter education and upcoming registration drive during the service.
- Create a Timeline and Start Planning.** Identify concrete, attainable goals. It may be helpful to see your campaign as having two components: congregation and community. Consider starting with a calendar and working backwards: What will we do on Election Day? The weekend before the registration deadline? How will we launch the campaign? How will we educate our congregation?

**TIP:** Set up an e-mail distribution list to stay in touch with your core leaders and volunteers!

#### 2. Congregation: Getting Your Own House in Order

- Make Registering Your Congregation the Highest Priority**, with a goal of 100% registration and turnout among those eligible. Do not assume that everyone in your congregation is already registered!
- Hold a “Faith in Democracy” Conversation** using the toolkit available from the Gamaliel interfaith organizing network at [www.gamaliel.org](http://www.gamaliel.org). The conversation is based on the premise that "the transformation of the center of our democracy is not only a political project, but a spiritual project."
- Hold Training Sessions on Registration and Education Procedures.** Topics include: How to approach potential registrants; Specific requirements for your community/state; what you'll tell registrants about next steps (see “Voter Education” on page 8 for more info).

- ☑ **Hold a Registration Drive Kick-Off** as an all-congregation event, with attention given in worship, religious education (especially youth group), social hour, etc. Create energy and momentum for voting, and for volunteering in the congregation's voter campaign. Have registration forms and related information readily available.

**TIP:** Track your progress by making a posters, goal maps, or charts and post in high-traffic areas in your congregation. Make updates publicly during social hour.

- ☑ **Reach Out to Groups Likely to be Unregistered:** New members, youth approaching or recently of voting age, and older members who may have a hard time getting to church.
- ☑ **Set Up Voter Registration Stations** that you'll maintain until the registration deadline. Locate them in high traffic areas, including where nonmembers are likely to pass as they attend other events at the congregation. Decorate your registration table with red, white, and blue and other symbols of civic participation that are meaningful to you and your congregation. Make sure you have an adequate plan for safeguarding the privacy of registration forms if you're going to collect them at an unsupervised location. Set up an internet connection if possible and encourage online through a secure site such as [www.rockthevote.com](http://www.rockthevote.com).

### 3. Community: Get Out Into It!

- ☑ **Work with Community Partners!** This is an opportunity to partner with local community organizations that may have significant expertise and resources devoted to voter mobilization. Congregations are strongly encouraged to partner with groups in their area in order to maximize the effectiveness of voter mobilization efforts. If your congregation already has a partnership with a congregation-based community organizing group or other community organization, team up for the 2008 election!

#### **SUGGESTED PARTNER:**

##### **ACORN Project Vote**

In 2004, the UU congregations worked with ACORN to register over 1.15 million new voters with a focus on under-represented voters. In the last election, Project Vote precincts reported significant increases in turnout.

**Join Project Vote in 2008!**  
**[projectvote.org](http://projectvote.org)**

- ☑ **Build Relationships** with organizations that represent and/or are comprised of people from marginalized groups, such as poor people, recent immigrants, people of color, and/or people with disabilities. The election season is a great time to begin a lasting relationship.
- ☑ **Seek Out UUA Partners.** For a list of existing partnerships between the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations and other national organizations, visit <http://www.uua.org/socialjustice>. Many of the groups listed hold annual voter registration and GOTV drives.
- ☑ **Partner with Other Congregations.** UU congregations working in clusters were hugely successful in election work in 2004. Interfaith collaboration around civic participation is also highly effective. Check out the resources at [www.faithfuldemocracy.org](http://www.faithfuldemocracy.org) or strike up a conversation with the congregation next door!

- ☑ **BE CAREFUL!** Do not partner with candidates, parties or other political groups engaged in partisan work (such as Political Action Committees or IRS Section 527 organizations), which could be considered political campaign intervention and thus jeopardize your nonprofit tax status!

- ☑ **Possible Venues for Voter Registration:**

- ★ Your congregation's neighborhood
- ★ High-traffic public areas, such as urban hotspots, grocery stores, public transit stations, etc.
- ★ Special events: concerts, festivals, etc.
- ★ College campuses
- ★ Your personal neighborhood
- ★ Anywhere people are standing in long lines and have nothing else to do!

- ☑ **Tips for an Effective Registration Campaign (Best Practices from UU congregations)**

- ★ Recruit volunteers with personal requests. General announcements—whether electronic, oral or printed—can be helpful, but nothing is more effective than a direct, personal invitation.
- ★ Link voter registration and election work into ongoing congregational social justice projects.
- ★ Integrate voter registration into every congregational activity. Have voter registration tables at all events, soup kitchens, and Sunday services.
- ★ Work with your minister to find creative ways he/she can support election activities from the pulpit and within the congregation.
- ★ Set concrete goals and timelines. For example, schedule four weekends before Election Day to register voters.
- ★ Keep a database (or at least contact list) of everyone who expresses interest in volunteering. Invite volunteers to take on specific tasks.
- ★ Involve youth and young adults. The energy and expertise of the young people in your congregation can help make your campaign wildly successful.
- ★ Support your volunteers. Provide clear information well in advance about what's expected, from the date and times of the commitment(s) to what they will be doing. Make sure that each and every volunteer receives adequate training about the relevant legal guidelines and procedures!
- ★ Keep in mind basic human needs: make sure that volunteers have sufficient access to water, restrooms, and food (even if this means letting people know that they need to bring their own).
- ★ Keep contact information for everyone you register, this way you can GET OUT THEIR VOTES on Election Day! See sample "Pledge to Vote" sign up sheet on the last page of this guide.

**TIP:** Ground your electoral work in our Unitarian Universalist values! Set aside opportunities to reflect and talk about how what you are doing is connected to—and shaping—your beliefs.

## B. VOTER EDUCATION

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For the first-time voter voting can seem like a daunting process. Ask newly registered voters if they have any questions about the process.

### Be sure to tell voters:

**1. What's Next** in the registration process according to the laws of your state or community. Should they expect a card in the mail? How will they know they're registered?

**2. How to Find Their Polling Place.** Voters can call 1-866-OUR-VOTE. The League of Women provides a Polling Place lookup at <http://www.vote411.org/pollingplace.php>.

**3. What to Bring to the Polls.** Will they need a photo ID, proof of residency, or any other documentation?

**4. Their Right** to cast a provisional ballot or otherwise seek redress if their registration is challenged on Election Day. Voters with concerns or questions can call the Election Protection Coalition at 1-866-OUR-VOTE.

**5. Where to Find Information on Candidates and Issues.** Congregations may provide nonpartisan voting guides as well as online information. Project Vote Smart ([www.Vote-Smart.org](http://www.Vote-Smart.org)), has a comprehensive website with information on thousands of candidates. Access to this information is also available via their toll-free hotline: 1-888-VOTE-SMART (1-888-868-3762). Set up an internet connection at your registration table and invite voters to look up relevant election information immediately!

**6. When to Vote! Election Day 2008 is Tuesday, November 4, 2008.**

### Other Voter Education Activities

- Host an Issue-Based Community Forum.** This can be a congregation-only event or open to the public. Utilize the experts in your congregation and/or invite local leaders in fields such as politics, economics, environmental science, etc. Be sure that questions and discussion cover a variety of topics so as not to favor one political party or candidate. Use local media outlets to advertise.
- Hold a Candidate Forum.** Local candidates are most likely to accept an invitation. (Be sure to consult The Real Rules and other resources in the back of this guide for details on how to invite candidates to your congregation in a manner that does not violate IRS rules. Remember that ALL candidates must be invited and commit to attend.) Use local media outlets to advertise.
- Host Debate Watching Parties.** This is particularly effective near college and seminary campuses or for youth groups. Remember, even this activity must be nonpartisan. If you show a debate for one political party, you must show all debates. Food is a great way to boost attendance! Have registration materials available and use this opportunity to encourage people to vote and to join your GOTV efforts.

**TIP:** Ask voters immediately if they will need a ride to the polls on Election Day. Keep a list of names and contact information of voters needing transportation assistance. Contact them before Election Day to confirm and make arrangements.

- ☑ **Ask Questions at Political Forums.** Encourage members of your congregation to pose questions at local events leading up to Election Day. Be sure to identify your congregation and tell the candidates and audience why you are concerned about a particular issue. Take the opportunity to share your knowledge of an issue, but don't forget to ask a question that involves a specific commitment linked to a specific dollar amount or policy.
- ☑ **Use the Media to Raise Awareness.** Write letters to the editor or op-eds encouraging people to vote and raising awareness of specific issues. Keep your letters short and to the point. Mention your congregation! For information on using the media and tips on writing letters and op-eds, visit the "Resources" section of [www.uua.org/socialjustice](http://www.uua.org/socialjustice).

### **C. VOTER MOBILIZATION: GET-OUT-THE-VOTE (GOTV)!**

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As it gets closer to Election Day, shift the focus of your campaign from registering voters to increasing turnout.

- ☑ **Contact Everyone You Registered by Phone or Mail.** Use the list you compiled as you were registering voters. Hold a phone bank at the congregation or divide the list and have volunteers make calls from home. Post cards make great reminders and direct mail can be more effective than email reminders.
- ☑ **Canvass** door-to-door in neighborhoods near your congregation. Working with an organized GOTV group provides resources and information that make this work rewarding and fun. Make it a pizza or potluck party! Remember to only partner with nonpartisan groups.
- ☑ **Provide Rides to the Polls** on Election Day. Create a system for volunteers to shuttle voters from the congregation or local schools. Advertise rides in local community papers or other media outlets.
- ☑ **Work as Poll Assistants or Poll Monitors.** Members of your congregation can serve as poll workers (through official government agencies) or poll monitors (through nonprofit organizations working to ensure that voter's rights are not infringed). See <http://866ourvote.org> to volunteer for poll monitoring.
- ☑ **Encourage Voters to Take Time to Vote.** The majority of people who are registered but do not vote say they were too busy, or had conflicting work or school schedules. Many businesses and organizations allow employees to take time off to vote, but employees don't know about this policy. Work with your chamber of commerce and other business associations to promote enactment and awareness of Election Day policies.
- ☑ **Be Visible on Election Day!** Hold signs encouraging voting near busy traffic intersections, place leaflets on cars, hand out stickers. As long as you do not mention a candidate or party, you can be as creative as you would like to be.<sup>3</sup>

**“Good old fashioned door-to-door canvassing seems to be the clear winner”** when it comes to nonpartisan efforts to **increase voter turnout...**  
*- Yale Civic Engagement Project*

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<sup>3</sup> “Called to be a Public Church: 2008 ELCA Voting and Civic Participation Guide,” Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2007. Text used by permission.

## D. VOTER ADVOCACY AND EMPOWERMENT

2008 is the year for fair elections! Unitarian Universalists around the nation are working to make sure that every vote counts.

- ☑ Visit organizations like Common Cause ([www.commoncause.org](http://www.commoncause.org)) and Public Campaign ([www.publiccampaign.org](http://www.publiccampaign.org)) to learn more about election reform efforts, including voting machine technology and public financing.
- ☑ Raise awareness of voter rights during your registration and GOTV campaigns.
- ☑ Report any violations or concerns to legal counsel at the Election Protection Coalition by calling 1-866-OUR-VOTE.
- ☑ Visit the American Civil Liberties Union ([www.aclu.org/votingrights](http://www.aclu.org/votingrights)) to educate yourself and your congregation about felon enfranchisement and other voting rights issues.
- ☑ Continue to advocate for voter rights after the election. After your congregation's involvement in registering, educating and mobilizing voters, continue to write to local media outlets and visit your elected officials to report on your work. Maintain relationships with community partners and coalitions after Election Day. Host discussions and community forums on election-related policy issues. Keep it up!

<b>SAMPLE CAMPAIGN CALENDAR</b>
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Date	Occasion	Activity
Sept 1	Labor Day/ Campaign Kick-off or Renewal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ Tie-in with worship &amp; religious education;</li> <li>★ voter registration table at coffee hour;</li> <li>★ set up voter registration station, etc</li> </ul>
Varies by State	Registration Deadline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ Big final push for registrations. Make sure that anything we collect is submitted on time!</li> </ul>
Oct 31-Nov 1	Last weekend before the election day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ GOTV activities; final push for volunteers; publicize Election Day plans</li> </ul>
Nov 4	Election Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ GOTV, including rides to the polls; poll monitoring; etc</li> </ul>
	Post-Election Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ Campaign Wrap-Up Party</li> <li>★ Analyze your effort, reflect, and celebrate!</li> <li>★ Meet with coalition members and community partners to discuss future collaboration.</li> </ul>

### ***A Reminder on Where to Get Information about Voter Registration in Your State***

- ★ For basic information about registration, visit [www.votesmart.org](http://www.votesmart.org).
- ★ For comprehensive third-party voter registration guides for all 50 states and the District of Columbia, see <http://866ourvote.org>.

## RESOURCES

- ★ **Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations** ([www.uua.org/socialjustice](http://www.uua.org/socialjustice))  
Resources to help your congregation be an effective advocate for social justice in your community.
- ★ **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
(<http://archive.elca.org/advocacy/publicchurch>)  
“Called to Be a Public Church: 2008 ELCA Voting and Civic Participation Guide” Excellent resource and step-by-step guide for election-related activities within congregations.
- ★ **Electionline.org**, a project of the Pew Center on the States, is a nonpartisan, non-advocacy Web site providing up-to-the-minute news and analysis on election reform.
- ★ **Faithful Democracy** ([www.faithfuldemocracy.org](http://www.faithfuldemocracy.org))  
Nonpartisan, online clearinghouse made up of national, faith-based organizations with resources to educate and engage people of faith about the role they can and should play in the democratic process.
- ★ **Federal Election Commission** ([www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov))  
For information on federal and state election laws, absentee ballots, deadlines and voter registration.
- ★ **Gamaliel Foundation** ([www.gamaliel.org](http://www.gamaliel.org)) See their “Faith in Democracy Toolkit”
- ★ **The Interfaith Alliance** ([www.tialliance.org/elections](http://www.tialliance.org/elections))  
“One Nation Many Faiths VOTE 2008: A Guide for Houses of Worship”  
Video: “Navigating the Intersection Between Religion and Politics”
- ★ **The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life** ([www.pewforum.org](http://www.pewforum.org))  
“Politics and the Pulpit 2008: A Guide to the Internal Revenue Code Restrictions on the Political Activity of Religious Organizations” “Online FAQ and PDF)
- ★ **Project Vote** ([www.projectvote.org](http://www.projectvote.org)) The leading technical assistance and direct service provider to the civic participation community.
- ★ **Project Vote Smart** ([www.votesmart.org](http://www.votesmart.org)) An enormous compilation of information and resources on candidate’s positions and voting generally.
- ★ **Rock the Vote!** ([www.rockthevote.com](http://www.rockthevote.com)) Exciting and innovative programming by and for youth and young adults. Concert series and record turnout efforts planned for 2008.
- ★ **US Election Assistance Commission** ([www.eac.gov](http://www.eac.gov)) Click “Register to Vote” to learn about and access the National Voter Registration Form.
- ★ **Yale Civic Engagement Project** ([www.yale.edu/vote/canvassing.html](http://www.yale.edu/vote/canvassing.html)) in conjunction with the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)

