

Gear Up!

Your Nonprofit Can Get Involved in (Nonpartisan) Election Activities

With the 2012 election dominating the news and the North Carolina primary approaching on May 8, you may be wondering what your nonprofit can do to get involved. The answer: Probably more than you think, as long as you remain nonpartisan! Here's a quick guide on nonprofits and elections.

Why should your nonprofit get involved? Nonprofits serve many populations with a history of low voter participation. We have a stronger voice in the policy arena when the people we serve vote. And because nonprofits are trusted messengers in our communities, people are likely to pay attention when we provide information about elections and encourage them to register and vote.

What are you prohibited from doing? As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, you can't support or oppose candidates or political parties. This means you can't:

- ▼ Endorse candidates for office.
- ▼ Contribute money or resources to candidates, political parties, or independent PACs (political action committees).
- ▼ Coordinate activities with political campaigns.
- ▼ Give candidates access to your facilities, events, or resources – unless you offer the same opportunities to all candidates at their fair market value. If you invite a candidate to your nonprofit's event because of his or her professional role (rather than as a candidate), it's important that you not mention the person's candidacy.

So what can you do? Your nonprofit can do a wide range of nonpartisan activities to engage your board, staff, volunteers, and the people they serve in elections. You can:

- ▼ Educate voters on the voting process. You can provide information – such as where polling places are located and when early voting is available – that helps people participate in elections. For more, check out this free webinar from

the N.C. Center: <https://cc.readytalk.com/cc/s/showReg?udc=6ewjyxutmuo4>.

- ▼ Register voters. Nonprofits can offer voter registration cards at their facilities and events. If you provide direct services, you can incorporate voter registration into your intake process.
- ▼ Participate in get-out-the-vote activities. Encourage voting simply by publicizing Election Day with posters, postcards, and emails, and by sharing toll-free numbers to call for basic voter information. Nonprofits also can provide or promote rides to the polls offered by nonpartisan community groups.
- ▼ Give your staff time off to vote or volunteer at a polling place.
- ▼ Engage with candidates on your issues. A candidate forum or questionnaire is a great way to get your nonprofit's issue into the public discourse. For a forum, you need to send identical invitations to *all* candidates. It's important to have a moderator to keep things balanced, and you must give every candidate an equal opportunity to speak and respond to questions. For a questionnaire, be certain to send the same questions to all candidates and publish unedited responses. For more, see your Winter 2012 *Common Ground*.
- ▼ Advocate. Nonprofits can and should be advocates for their issues. Your nonprofit can still lobby during an election year, but you need to be careful not to imply that you support or oppose candidates because of positions they've taken as elected officials. It's important to keep your issue advocacy separate from your voter registration and education activities.
- ▼ Advocate on ballot initiatives. With a constitutional amendment on the ballot on May 8 and local ballot questions pending in November, North Carolina voters will make critical public policy decisions at the polls in 2012. Because voters are the lawmakers for these ballot questions, nonprofits *can* take a position. Any public advocacy you do on these issues is direct lobbying, not political campaign intervention. For more, check out this free webinar from the Center: <https://cc.readytalk.com/cc/>

[playback/Playback.do?id=5z1mos](https://cc.readytalk.com/cc/s/showReg?udc=6ewjyxutmuo4).

What can your staff and board do?

As individuals, your board, staff, and volunteers can support candidates for office. But they need to be certain they don't imply that they're speaking on behalf of your nonprofit, and they can't use your organization's website, events, publications, or resources when they're helping out political campaigns. And if an employee, board member, or volunteer of your nonprofit is running for office, don't mention their candidacy in your nonprofit's publications, website, or events, since this can imply an endorsement.

What grant funds can you use?

Private foundations can fund many nonpartisan voter engagement activities, but can't earmark money for lobbying on ballot initiatives and can only earmark money for voter registration if it's done in five or more states and over more than one election cycle. You can use general support grants from foundations for advocacy and nonpartisan voter registration. If you have government grants or contracts, you generally can't use this for lobbying or civic engagement. Check with your accountant and major funders to be certain you're tracking your expenses on election-year activities appropriately.

Where can you learn more? Check out the Center's website (www.ncnonprofits.org) and public policy updates. Nonprofit VOTE (www.nonprofitvote.org) and Democracy North Carolina (www.democracy-nc.org/action/nonprofits.html) both have excellent resources for nonprofits and elections. ■

– David Heinen

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