



Working with Candidates on a nonpartisan basis

Elections present a great opportunity to interact with candidates for elected office. As a 501(c)(3) organization, you can't endorse or support candidates. However, this does not mean you shouldn't use campaigns to get your issues in front of the candidates. A campaign is a chance for your nonprofit to build relationships, share your policy ideas and influence future debate. Here are six ways nonprofits can connect to candidates during elections.

1. Sponsor a Candidate Forum

When you sponsor a candidate forum, your nonprofit gets connected with the candidates, raising your profile with future elected officials and candidates for office. A candidate forum puts the candidates in front of voters from your neighborhood to state their positions, answer questions and respond to each other and the audience.

2. Have a Candidate Attend an Event

You may invite candidates to attend one of your events. The invitation itself gets your name in front of the candidates. Having a candidate attend an event provides an informal opportunity for your constituents, board and staff to meet office seekers.

3. Do a Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate questionnaires let candidates know about the issues you care about. Ask the candidates to answer a set of questions. Post their answers on your website or turn them into a nonpartisan candidate guide. Questionnaires take time to prepare and conduct, so you may want to consider collaborating with a partner or coalition.

4. Share Your Policy Ideas

Elected officials can benefit from your ideas year-round. During elections, they need the latest research

and fresh ideas to answer questions and connect to voters. You're an expert in your field. Make your existing research and ideas available to all candidates.

5. Attend Candidate Events

You can ask questions at candidate events. If you are representing your nonprofit, however, your approach must be nonpartisan (e.g., you must ask the same questions at the events of all candidates for the same office.)

6. Set up a 501(c)(4) Organization

Nonprofits who do more legislative advocacy often establish a related 501(c)(4) organization. 501(c)(4) organizations may do an unlimited amount of lobbying. They may also do partisan election activity so long as election work is secondary to its primary purpose. Donors to a 501(c)(4) organization do not get a tax deduction.

Resources

Nonprofit VOTE (www.NonprofitVOTE.org)

A Nonprofit's Guide to Hosting a Candidate Forum Toolkit
Hosting a Candidate Forum Presentation (narrated)

Nonprofits, Voting and Elections: Online guide to nonpartisan activities for 501(c)(3) organizations
Nonprofits, Voting and Elections Presentation (narrated)

League of Women Voters (www.lwv.org)

FAQ'S Candidate Forums and Debates

Alliance for Justice (www.afj.org)

Election Year Advocacy: Candidate Questionnaires
Comparison of 501(c)(3), 501(c)(4) and Political Organizations"

IRS (www.irs.gov)

Fact Sheet on Election Year Activity

Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest

(www.clpi.org)

Nonprofits and Election-Related Activities