



Election Advocacy for 501(c)(3) Organizations

Helpful Guidelines & Resources

Nonprofits or 501(c)(3) organizations have the right to lobby and should do so; however, lobbying activities are limited by IRS regulations. There are two types of political activity: 1) Lobbying for legislation and 2) Getting involved in the election process, or *Policies versus People*, respectively.

Nonprofit 501(c)(3) organizations are prohibited from electioneering—supporting or endorsing candidates, but can ALWAYS talk about policies/issues to anyone who will listen, like candidates, other voters, on television or street corners. Put simply, they can talk *Policies*, NOT *People*.

Here are some helpful guidelines to keep in mind for your 501(c)(3):

- Yes, you **CAN** conduct voter registration drives.
- Yes, you **CAN** conduct voter education activities such as candidate forums. Discussion of broad, social, economic, and similar policy issues requiring legislative solution, so long as the discussion does not address the merits of specific legislation, is also okay.
- Yes, you **CAN** sponsor or conduct candidate debates or forums as long as all candidates are treated in a fair and impartial manner. Also, all candidates must be invited.
- Yes, you **CAN** promote participation in the electoral process, as long as it's nonpartisan.
- Yes, you **CAN** produce nonpartisan voter guides to educate the public on the candidates' positions on the issues based on the candidates' responses to a questionnaire. You can also make available the result of nonpartisan analysis, study or research on a legislative issue.
- Yes, you **CAN** engage in direct communication with legislators, executive officials, their staff, and/or the general public about a general issue of concern where there is no reference or view expressed on specific legislation and no call to action on that legislation.
- No, you **CANNOT** support or oppose candidates for public office.
- No, you **CANNOT** refer candidates using "code words," such as "conservative" or "liberal." These can be seen as labels by which voters can identify the organization's favored candidates.

Visit the **Michigan Participation Project** website, www.michparticipationproject.org, which provides nonpartisan voter engagement resources to the nonprofit community, including detailed guidelines for election advocacy for 501(c)(3) organizations.

**Source: Information adapted from: "E-Advocacy for Nonprofits: The Law of Lobbying and Election Related Activity on the Net" a publication by the Alliance for Justice. For more information, visit their website at: www.afj.org.*