What Nonprofit Staff Can Do

Nonprofit staff members often have questions about their personal involvement in political campaigns or work with candidates. Outside of work, nonprofit employees are free to volunteer for candidate campaigns or engage in other partisan political activities. However, it is important to make clear distinctions between personal and professional efforts, as all voter engagement activities on behalf of your nonprofit must remain completely nonpartisan.

Q: When is it personal time?
A: Outside of normal work hours, nonprofit staff may engage in partisan activities, like supporting a candidate for office. Staff may also take vacation or personal time for the purpose of engaging in political activity.

Q: Can staff be identified with their nonprofit organization when supporting a candidate?
A: Nonprofit staff members may identify their place of employment at a political event. However, staff members who are spokespeople for their organization or are otherwise visibly associated with it should emphasize that they are in attendance as a private citizen and not on behalf of the organization they work for.

Q: Can staff be listed as a supporter of a candidate with the name of the organization?
A: As a rule, it is safer to leave the name of the organization off of any partisan political materials. However, it is permissible to list the organization along with the staff member’s name if it is clearly stated that the organization is listed “for identification purposes only.”

Q: What about board members and volunteers?
A: While representing the nonprofit organization, board members and volunteers should follow the same protocol outlined for staff.

Q: What if a candidate lists the name of the Executive Director or another employee without their permission?
A: If a candidate lists the Executive Director or any staff member along with the organization’s name on campaign material without the appropriate disclaimer (e.g. “for identification purposes only”) the organization is not at fault. Ask the campaign to remove your organization’s name from the list, and be sure to save a copy of your email or written request for your files.

Separate Your Personal Political Participation from Your Nonprofit Work

- Provide political campaigns or candidates a personal phone number, email address, and times to call you outside of your work hours.
- Don’t use any of your organization’s resources to support or oppose a candidate – like organizational vehicles, copy machines, paper, supplies, etc.

Nonprofit organizations, themselves, may offer certain resources to candidates such as event space or phones – but only if publicly available to all candidates in a race at their fair market rental value.

Resources

- “Election Activities of Individuals Associated with 501(c)(3) Organizations,” Boulder Advocacy (Alliance for Justice), www.bolderadvocacy.org
- “What Nonprofit Staff Can Do: Voter Engagement at Work and Off the Clock” webinar and PowerPoint presentation, Nonprofit VOTE, www.nonprofitvote.org

Nonprofit VOTE
www.nonprofitvote.org
A 501(c)(3) organization may NOT conduct partisan activities to support or oppose any candidate for public office, including -

- Endorsing a candidate.
- Making a campaign contribution to, or an expenditure for, a candidate.
- Rating candidates on who is most favorable to your issue(s).
- Letting candidates use the organization’s facilities or resources, unless those resources are made equally available to all candidates at their fair market value.

Activities 501(c)(3) Organizations CAN Conduct on a Nonpartisan Basis
Nonprofits can conduct a wide range of nonpartisan engagement activities to encourage voter participation and educate voters.

- Conduct or Promote Voter Registration
  Make registration forms available at the information desk, actively table during peak hours, or incorporate registration into ongoing services.

- Host or Co-Sponsor a Candidate Forum
  Help your community familiarize themselves with the candidates and where they stand on the issues.

- Distribute Nonpartisan Sample Ballots, Candidate Questionnaires, or Voter Guides
  Provide nonpartisan information about who and what is on the ballot to help your constituents and community understand what’s at stake.

- Continue Issue Advocacy During an Election
  Election season is a great time to put a spotlight on your organization's mission and goals. Write an op-ed or guest column for your local paper.

- Educate Voters on the Voting Process
  Demystify the voting process by helping voters determine where, when, and how to vote. Look up polling locations and describe to new voters what will happen at the polls.

- Encourage Staff to Serve as Poll Workers or Translators
  Nonprofit staff can facilitate the democratic process and help your community participate fully on Election Day.

- Educate the Candidates on Your Issues
  Send candidates your research and policy ideas. Be sure to share the materials with every candidate in a particular race.

- Organize Get-Out-the-Vote Activities
  Offer rides to the polls, distribute cards with election information, and turn Election Day into a celebration!

- Support or Oppose a Ballot Measure*
  Take a stand on a ballot measure, particularly if it impacts your work or clients. Engaging the public around ballot measures can help further your mission and public policy goals.

- Encourage and Remind People to Vote
  Incorporate voting reminders into services and programs. Make the election visible in your communications and at your agency.

Resources
Nonprofit VOTE - www.nonprofitvote.org
- Nonprofits, Voting and Elections: A guide to nonpartisan voter engagement for 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations
- “Being Nonpartisan: 501(c)(3) Guidelines for Nonprofits” webinar and PowerPoint presentation

Bolder Advocacy (Alliance for Justice)
www.bolderadvocacy.org
- The Rules of the Game
- “Election Checklist for 501(c)(3) Public Charities”

IRS - www.irs.gov
- “Election Year Activities for Section 501(c)(3) Organizations” (FS-2006-17, February 2006)

* Remember that advocating for or against a ballot measure is lobbying, not electioneering. 501(c)(3) nonprofits are free to take sides or to stay neutral.