

# GUIDANCE FOR PRIORITIZING SAFETY WHEN ENGAGING WITH CANDIDATES

Engaging with candidates for public office, especially those whose views may be discriminatory, threatening, or outright hostile, requires careful preparation and awareness to ensure that your physical, mental, and emotional safety and well-being remain the number one top priority. **YOUR SAFETY AND WELL-BEING ARE, AND ALWAYS WILL BE, MORE IMPORTANT THAN ENGAGING CANDIDATES.**

## Preparation

- 1. Clarify your goal.** Determine what you want to gain from engaging with a candidate. Do you want to learn more about what they would do on an issue if elected, clarify their past positions, or something else?
- 2. Research the candidate.** Understand the candidate's past statements, actions, and potential associations with groups that have endorsed violence. Being well-informed will help you anticipate potential hostility and determine if the interaction is appropriate for you or another advocate to explore.
  - ▶ This is a moment to leverage our movement's diversity. Some individuals and communities are more at risk than others. For example, an interaction might be unsafe for you but not for your white or cisgender colleague. Consider where there is an opportunity to *safely and intentionally* leverage privilege to prevent marginalized advocates from encountering hostility; however, regardless of identity, all parties must prioritize their safety and well-being.
- 3. Assess your comfort and boundaries.** Determine whether you are comfortable engaging with this candidate and then carefully consider your boundaries. Perhaps this is a candidate you would prefer to engage with on social media rather than in person. If you want to pursue an in-person interaction, what type of behavior would cause you to end the interaction? Remember that it is okay to choose not to engage with a candidate and to firmly hold your boundaries. Your health and well-being are always the priority.
- 4. Know your rights.** Familiarize yourself with your rights as an advocate. Understanding what you are legally allowed to do and say can empower you and help avoid unnecessary confrontations.
- 5. Plan your engagement.** Outline your key points and questions ahead of time. Having a clear plan can help keep the conversation focused and reduce the likelihood of escalation.
- 6. Practice!** Ask a colleague to role-play the interaction with you. Practice any challenging or hostile questions you anticipate and workshop responses — including de-escalation techniques and exit tactics, as needed.



## During Engagement

- 1. Maintain a steady demeanor.** Assuming you are safe, maintain a steady demeanor, even if the candidate becomes hostile. Avoid raising your voice or using aggressive body language. This can help de-escalate tense situations and keep the conversation productive.
- 2. Use the buddy system.** Whenever possible, bring a colleague or friend into the conversation. Having someone with you can provide support and help you de-escalate if you have to exit the situation.
- 3. Choose a safe environment.** Meet in public places where there are other people around. This can deter hostile behavior and ensure that you have witnesses.
- 4. Monitor your environment.** Maintain awareness of the tone of any surrounding interactions (i.e., if you are at a campaign event). Reposition yourself in the space as needed (e.g., to the outside of the space or closer to an exit) and identify who to alert for support if tensions rise.
- 5. Have an exit plan.** Know how to leave the situation quickly if needed, making note of exits. Plan what you'll say to extract yourself from the situation if needed.
- 6. Avoid confrontation.** If the candidate becomes aggressively hostile, do not engage further. Prioritize your safety and immediately leave the area and find a safe space or, if comfortable for you, law enforcement or another safety figure nearby.

## Post-Engagement

- 1. Take care of mental health.** Engaging with hostile individuals can be stressful. Ensure you have a support system in place to debrief and decompress after the interaction.
- 2. Debrief.** Discuss the interaction with your colleagues or support network. This helps process the experience and plan future strategies.
- 3. Report any incidents.** If you experience or witness any illegal or threatening behavior, report it to your organization and the appropriate authorities, as you are comfortable.
- 4. Self-care.** Engage in activities that help you relax and recharge. Taking care of your mental and physical health is crucial for ongoing advocacy work.

These guidelines will help advocates understand the range of possibilities for candidate interactions. Our goal is for all interactions to be a polite, respectful exchange of policy ideas. NCIT advocates never should engage in any hostile comments or tone, for a variety of reasons: it could violate your nonprofit status, it could lead to a confrontation, and it's just not an effective way to achieve policy change. Right now, with an uptick in political violence, it's crucial for advocates to prioritize their physical, mental, and emotional safety and well-being. The stakes of this election are extraordinarily high; nevertheless, your safety and well-being will always be of greater importance.

*\* This is a resource to equip advocates with useful information, not legal guidance from the NCIT. Advocates should assess any risks before engaging with candidates.*