

MAKING THE CASE: WHY NCIT MEMBERS SHOULD ENGAGE WITH CANDIDATES, AND YES, 501(C)(3) ORGANIZATIONS CAN!

Why You Should Engage with Candidates

Incumbent or not, today's candidates could be tomorrow's policymakers who hold the power to impact the lives of infants, toddlers, expectant parents, and families. Engaging with candidates before they're elected has several clear benefits for your organization and the broader movement of prenatal to three advocates.



- **Educating the candidates on your issue.** While on the campaign trail, candidates are learning about an enormous number of policy issues at once. It can be challenging, if not impossible, to gain an equally deep understanding of each issue! You are the expert on your issue, so you have the opportunity to share that expertise with candidates directly by providing trusted information.
- **Energizing supporters.** Campaigns can be exciting and inspirational for your organization's supporters – who double as candidates' potential voters and constituents. You can demonstrate to candidates that your organization has 'people power' (i.e., the power to turn out people for a cause) by building a culture of civic engagement and encouraging your supporters to become voters. Harnessing this energy for future advocacy actions demonstrates voters' appetite for your issue and the strength of our movement – both of which catch candidates' and policymakers' attention when seeking to gain or maintain power. Candidates will realize that by talking about your policy issues on the campaign trail, they'll capture some of your advocates' energy.
- **Building collaborative relationships.** Engaging with candidates during the campaign is a great way to position your organization as a trusted resource on the issues you know best. Demonstrating that your organization is a trusted policy resource to them while on the campaign trail sets you up for success when it is time to engage in policy advocacy. These early conversations lay the foundation for ongoing dialogue with policymakers, which is essential for sustained advocacy and policy development down the road.
- **Setting the stage for accountability.** The questions you ask candidates on the campaign trail reveal whether that candidate is supportive or weak on issues that matter to you. Depending on the candidate, engaging with them during an election can position your organization and its members as a force of accountability who will hold them to the promises made on the campaign trail and/or a friendly resource who can offer expertise on a topic important to their voters.

Yes, You Can Engage with Candidates!

A common misconception is that 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations are entirely prohibited from engaging in elections. Rest assured, that's not the case! While there are limitations to this engagement, organizations can meaningfully and impactfully engage once they are clear on the rules.

Section 501(c)(3) organizations may not intervene in an election for public office to support or oppose any candidate or political party. We can't say "vote for" this candidate or "defeat" that candidate, of course, but the 501(c)(3) prohibition also covers more oblique statements that indirectly indicate support for or opposition to a candidate. The goal of this effort is not to express a view on any candidate. Instead, it's to engage in activities to elevate the discussion of issues that impact infants, toddlers, expectant parents, and their families. Getting candidates, journalists, and voters to talk about our issues in a nonpartisan manner is completely allowed for 501(c)(3) organizations.



With so much attention focused on the election, people are tuned in to policy issues now more than at any other time in the election cycle. The resources in this toolkit are designed to help your organization leverage that public attention in a 501(c)(3)-permissible manner. Additional resources are available [here](#) from NCIT to help organizations understand what's permissible issue advocacy versus prohibited campaign intervention.

- If you have additional questions before you're ready to consult your organization's legal counsel, reach out for access to NCIT's [No-Cost Consultation form](#).
- The Alliance for Justice also has a guidebook that explains the rules applicable to 501(c)(3) organizations engaged in elections: [Rules of the Game](#), available [here](#).
- And, if you (or your lawyer) want additional, technical information, read [IRS Revenue Ruling 2007-41](#).

These resources, and this toolkit, are not intended as legal advice; we encourage all organizations to consult their lawyer before engaging in any election-related activities.

Active and legally compliant engagement with candidates allows NCIT member organizations to play an important role in shaping policies that benefit infants, toddlers, and their families, fostering a healthier and more supportive society.