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Nonprofits Promoting Democracy and Nonpartisan Engagement

Nonprofits have, as of today, 63 days until the November 8 elections to engage their staffs, boards, volunteers, clients, and others in nonpartisan ways to promote civic engagement of voting. All seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and 35 in the U.S. Senate are up for election, while approximately 85 percent of [state legislative seats](#) (6,278) will be decided, as well as thousands of local elected officials. These are all positive opportunities for nonprofits to share their priorities and build relationships without taking sides over which candidates for elected office should and should not be elected. Some of the recent and upcoming activities around the country demonstrate the nonpartisan role nonprofits can and do play in their communities.

Why Nonpartisanship is Essential

All charitable, philanthropic, and religious organizations must comply with section 501(c)(3) of the federal tax code, which provides that in exchange for tax-exempt status and the ability to receive tax-deductible contributions, the organization may not, among other things, “participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.” Nonprofits embrace that provision, which is known as the [Johnson Amendment](#), because it shields them from divisive, toxic partisanship that would otherwise occur.

A recent meeting of the **Kentucky Nonprofit Network** biweekly town hall focused on how nonprofits can engage voters and support democracy. Nonprofit leaders heard from representatives from Nonprofit VOTE and the League of Women Voters to learn how to participate in nonpartisan activities and hear updates to voting laws in the Commonwealth. Nonprofit VOTE staff shared how a nonprofit can participate in National Voter Registration Day on September 20. They also promoted the Nonprofit Staff Vote initiative as a way for charitable organizations to support their employees to participate in elections without worrying about losing income. The Kentucky League of Voters answered questions on the voting process and options, including early voting and voting by mail. By providing nonprofits access to updated information and experts on these nonpartisanship actions, they are encouraged to join these efforts and participate in get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts.

The **Minnesota Council of Nonprofits** (MCN), building on their 2020 Census and election efforts, launched a [voter engagement grants program](#) in June to support voting in the 2022 midterm elections. MCN was awarded \$197,000 to provide grants to nonprofits with a history of organizing their communities or able to participate in election engagement. Based on criteria such as the grant framework and history of successful community organizing, thirty-one nonprofits across Minnesota were selected to lead nonpartisan voter engagement activities that include phone and text banks, voter registration drives, and other ideas proposed.



One permissible activity for 501(c)(3) nonprofits is to host candidate education events on issues that are relevant and pressing for their organization and clients. On September 22, the **Alliance of Arizona Nonprofits** and **Arizona Grantmakers Forum** will hold an issue-focused [Legislative Candidate Education Roundtable](#). During breakout sessions, candidates will hear from “nonprofit and philanthropic leaders with expertise in some of the top issues voters care about most in this election.” Those issues are identified as: stewardship of Arizona’s financial resources, protecting vulnerable populations, supporting quality education, and improving community health and affordable housing.

Similarly, the **CT Community Nonprofit Alliance** is hosting six virtual regional legislative candidate forums, providing an opportunity for nonprofits to meet with candidates and share the issues that are important to them. As noted in the state association of nonprofits’ newsletter: “relationship building is key to ensuring victories during the legislative session and beyond!” The point, of course, is that nonprofits win when candidates across the partisan spectrum support the priorities important to nonprofit missions and communities.

In New York City, [GoVoteNYC](#), a collaborative of foundations and donors, provides grants and technical assistance to nonprofits engaging in nonpartisan GOTV efforts, as well as other civic participation activities. This year they have provided \$1.05 million in grants to 11 nonprofits targeting more than two million new and infrequent voters to advance their mission of increasing voter participation in New York City. A recent op-ed [reflecting on the campaign’s 2021 efforts](#) highlights three investments as the “three V’s for voter engagement: validators, volunteers and visibility.” As a result of these efforts, 200 neighborhoods were reached, 33 candidate forums were held, and 70 ranked choice voting workshops informed neighbors about the changes to municipal elections. Through a combination of coalitions, volunteer mobilization, and accessible materials, local nonprofits can reach voters and encourage them to participate in elections.

Every election is called “the most important of our lifetime” by the candidates. True this time around or not, can your nonprofit afford to just sit on the sidelines and

wait until the candidates are elected before seeking to inform them about the issues that matter most to the people you serve?