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In Praise of Nonpartisan Electioneering

Charitable nonprofits are famously and appropriately barred from engaging in partisan, election related activities thanks to the longstanding [Johnson Amendment](#). But that doesn't mean 501(c)(3) organizations are forced to sit on the sidelines and watch silently as candidates for public office and their supporters seek to define and distort the issues of the day for their own personal and party ambitions. While scrupulously maintaining nonpartisanship, charitable organizations have the opportunity and duty to stand up as *nonpartisan* advocates for truth, their missions, and the wellbeing of their communities.

The activities of several state associations of nonprofits demonstrate not just advocacy in action, but democracy in action as they work to enlighten candidates, inform voters, inspire voting, educate other nonprofit, and engage in many other *nonpartisan* activities. None are waiting for the elections in November; full engagement has already started.

Enlightening Candidates

Most immediately, the **Providers' Council** in Massachusetts is hosting a [human services forum](#) on May 2 for candidates running for Lieutenant Governor, giving the

audience of nonprofit professionals the opportunity to hear directly from the candidates their goals for the Commonwealth. Likewise, the candidates will leave the forum more enlightened, after hearing from frontline nonprofits about their challenges and concerns on issues like the impact of workforce shortages on the people served in the community.

Informing Voters

Now that early primary voting in North Carolina has already started (and runs through May 14), the **North Carolina Center for Nonprofits** is actively encouraging nonprofits to share information with their staff, clients, and volunteers about voting places, voting rights, and where the candidates stand on the issues. Earlier this year, the state association of nonprofits invited every person running for Congress and the state legislature to fill out a [candidate questionnaire](#). Candidates answered questions about their personal experiences with nonprofits and how those shape their policy positions; their top three policy priorities; and which of the NC Center's policy goals they would support "most enthusiastically." [Candidates' responses](#) were posted on the organization's website, and nonprofits can share the responses with their staff, board, volunteers, donors, and clients, as well as invite candidates who have not yet completed it to share their insights (the Center created a [toolkit on how to invite them](#)).

Inspiring Voter Turnout

When nonprofits – trusted sources of information in their communities – encourage people to vote, voter participation can increase significantly. That's one reason charitable nonprofits often take the lead in voter engagement while "continuing to be above the political fray." **Nonprofit New York**, Community Votes, and Nonprofit VOTE partnered to create the [2022 Voter Engagement Toolkit](#) for 501(c)(3) nonprofits that includes a checklist on permissible election activities, reasons to do voter registration, frequently asked questions on civic engagement and ballot measures, and sample content to encourage voting. On the impact the toolkit had on voter turnout, Nonprofit New York, an association of nonprofits based in New York City, notes that "organizations who participated in a training using this toolkit turned out voters for the New York City primary election at a rate 15% higher than other voters in the City."

Educating Nonprofits

Farther north, the **Maine Association of Nonprofits** is hosting a special program for nonprofits early next month titled, [2022 Elections: How Maine Nonprofits Can Take Action](#). The virtual session will provide a quick overview of what's at stake in the 2022 election in Maine, explain why it matters to nonprofits, and answer questions about election-related activities that organizations (and their staff and volunteers) can and cannot do. The special guest speaker, the Deputy Secretary of State, will join in answering questions and explaining nonpartisan ways nonprofits can help their constituents be well-informed voters.

The Johnson Amendment that 501(c)(3) organizations have long embraced as a protective shield against divisive partisan politics declares that, to retain their tax-exempt status, charitable, philanthropic, and religious organizations may “not 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.”

As shown, being nonpartisan does not mean being inactive. Quite the contrary, charitable nonprofits correctly see elections as times to engage in and through their communities in myriad *nonpartisan* ways – meaning neither for nor against a candidate for public office. Nonprofit VOTE has [additional resources](#) for nonprofit staff and volunteers on how to connect with their community before Election Day, including a long list of [permissible activities](#) that keep nonprofits, their constituents, and candidates connected without tipping the scale in favor of individual candidates for public office.