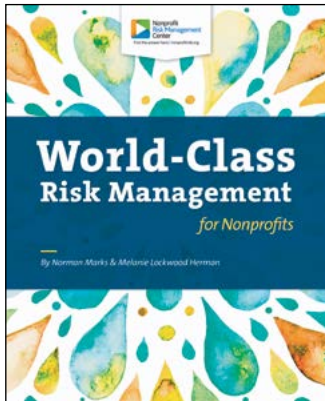


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## POLITICAL RISK ISSUE



## Politics and Vigilance: Election-Year Risks and Your Nonprofit

By Glenn Mott

*NRMC is grateful to attorney Cindy Lewin, Partner and co-chair of the Nonprofit Organizations practice at Venable, for speaking with us about some of the risks that nonprofit organizations face during an election cycle. Prior to joining Venable, Cindy served as executive vice president and general counsel for AARP, where she led the organization's legal, ethics and compliance, and ERM teams.*

At their core, most nonprofits have a mission that enacts and advocates for social change—whether it's supporting access to healthcare and human services, ending hunger in their community, or serving underrepresented populations. To be effective, organizations need to directly

address important issues of the day and respond to public policy debates, while balancing concern for possible negative consequences to their organization. It's a tall order. The 2020 elections offer an ideal environment in which to take a closer look at the intersection of nonprofit advocacy, accountability, and mission.

To get some perspective on this topic, NRMC asked Cindy Lewin to weigh in on a few framing questions:

**NRMC: It's fair to say that nonprofits and the communities they serve are feeling the direct impact of the current political climate of division. Why should nonprofits be hypervigilant during this election year?**

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# Risk Management ESSENTIALS

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## Politics and Vigilance: Election-Year Risks and Your Nonprofit CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

**Cindy Lewin:** For two important reasons. First, with any 501(c)(3) organization, the risk of losing your tax-exempt status is always a concern. It's relatively easy to make a mistake given the complex rules around dealing with elections. However, keep in mind that the IRS is unlikely to revoke a nonprofit's tax-exempt status simply because one field staff member made a misstep, such as praising a candidate's position on an issue at a local meeting.

Second, in our super polarized political environment, an organization's leaders must focus on the mission and understanding the entity's supporters; know who you are at your very core and be able to articulate your mission clearly without politicizing it. Keep in mind that it's very easy to alienate stakeholders if you take sides or are perceived as biased. There's also a significant risk of missing opportunities to build and sustain support for a charitable mission if your organization oversteps by getting involved in one-sided political activity. Instead of building stronger support the opposite can happen; once-happy stakeholders might turn away, or worse, turn against you.

### NRMC: What are some of the biggest mistakes that nonprofits make during a big election year?

**CL:** They may cross the line in the way they engage in politics. The organization's website and governing documents may indicate that it's a *nonpartisan* organization, but the nature of an activity in which it's involved creates a perception that it is supporting a candidate or political party. For example, a nonprofit might invite a political candidate to a meeting but fail to provide the same opportunity to the candidate's opponent(s). We hear from nonprofit leaders that "the rules aren't clear." While I agree that there are a lot of rules, in some cases they are clear but ignored!

### NRMC: Yet, nonprofits that treat social issues must be part of the solution through action and advocacy. How do nonprofits protect their status, while shaping the public debate, and public policy, on important causes?

**CL:** You've stated precisely the dilemma; another common mistake is that nonprofits are sometimes *too* tentative or risk averse. They worry that any lobbying or issue advocacy puts their tax-exempt status at risk. It's important to remember that advocating on issues as part of your mission on an ongoing basis is permitted and should not be viewed as supporting specific candidates, even if those candidates have also taken a position on some of the same issues.

### NRMC: What are some things organizations should be doing right now to prepare for or avoid risks that emerge in the wake of a Presidential election?

**CL:** I'd like to broaden that to include local and state as well as federal elections. There are lots of things nonprofits can and should do around issues that are important to their mission. Reaching out to campaign staff to share educational information about your mission, stakeholders, and key issues is a great idea. That outreach should extend far beyond the contenders for the office of President; share educational materials with candidates for congressional and statewide offices, too. By providing educational resources and materials during the campaign season, you're helping candidates "hit the ground running" when they take office.

Another approach is to reach out after the elections wrap to request an opportunity to meet with staff of newly elected officials to let them know about the issues that are important to your organization. Keep in mind that relationships take time to build, and care and nurturing to sustain.

### NRMC: We hear a lot about loopholes that allow corporate sponsors to direct

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**Politics and Vigilance: Election-Year Risks and Your Nonprofit**  
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“...another common mistake is that nonprofits are sometimes too tentative or risk averse. They worry that any lobbying or issue advocacy puts their tax-exempt status at risk.”

**funds to nonprofits for political gains. Are there specific risk concerns or risk management strategies that you would recommend to nonprofits that have close associations or ties to legislators?**

**CL:** Recognize that there are a lot of rules, understand what the rules mean, follow the rules! It’s not exciting, but that’s where you can get into trouble. This is a highly regulated, highly political, and highly technical area of expertise.

As most of your readers will know, *Citizens United vs. FEC* struck down a federal law prohibiting corporations and unions from making expenditures in connection with federal elections. *Citizens United*

unleashed a wave of 501(c)(4) organizations to make independent expenditures and run ads for candidates (as long as the 501(c)(4) isn’t coordinating with their campaign, etc.). The IRS initially said that these organizations must disclose their donors, then last summer, said a 501(c)(4) organization didn’t need to disclose donors to the public, just to the IRS so that it could look for patterns . . . but now they’re not even requiring that. The message? The rules are constantly evolving, so stay up to date on policy changes.

501(c)(3)s can’t make political contributions, of course, but 501(c)(4)s are direct advocacy organizations, raising

## The Confidence to Speak Out

Bolder Advocacy is a program of the Alliance for Justice that “promotes active engagement in the policy making process by giving nonprofits and foundations the confidence to speak out courageously and protecting their right to do so,” along with the resources and tools nonprofits and foundations can use to navigate complex advocacy rules and regulations.

The Bolder Advocacy program website ([bolderadvocacy.org](http://bolderadvocacy.org)), is a place where users can search a robust collection of resources that help nonprofits stay up to date. The site provides examples of how nonprofits have used advocacy to advance their causes, and promotes tools that help nonprofits measure and develop their capacity and evaluate accomplishments.

## Advocacy vs. Lobbying

The IRS states: “no organization may qualify for section 501(c)(3) status if a substantial part of its activities is attempting to influence legislation (commonly known as lobbying). A 501(c)(3) organization may engage in some lobbying, but too much lobbying activity risks loss of tax-exempt status.”

For some, this terrain can feel a bit slippery. It can be difficult to conclude what is “substantial.” Fortunately, the IRS gives nonprofits the choice of opting into the [expenditure test](#) by filing a 501(h) election. The expenditure test outlines the exact amount of money that can be spent on lobbying efforts in relation to the amount your organization spends on the delivery of your charitable purpose.

The (h) election allows a nonprofit to opt out of the vague [substantial part test](#) and use the friendlier expenditure test. The expenditure test has great advantages over attempting to navigate what constitutes “substantial” for your organization. Whether a 501(c)(3) nonprofit’s activities constitute a “substantial part” of your overall activities is ultimately up to the IRS to decide on a case-by-case basis. Again, turn to your organization’s attorney or accountant for additional guidance.



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**“Recognize that there are a lot of rules, understand what the rules mean, follow the rules!”**

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a lot of money and making independent expenditures for political gains.

**NRMC: What do you wish nonprofit leaders knew, or what issues do nonprofits overlook during an election year?**

**CL:** Sophisticated nonprofits generally know about the rules, but new or smaller ones may be less informed or may have fewer resources. I want all nonprofits to know that it’s important to continue to engage in the world, including advocating and lobbying on issues related to their mission if they have continually done that. Unfortunately, many nonprofits miss important opportunities to make an impact and educate legislators because they believe they aren’t allowed to reach out during an election year. When in fact, their mission often depends upon holding elected officials accountable.

**NRMC: Any resources that you would point our readers to?**

**CL:** Yes. I would highly recommend the Alliance for Justice for materials on their Bolder Advocacy website (the Alliance is a 501(c)(3) organization). You can download the useful book *the Connection: Strategies for Creating and Operating 501(c)(3)s, 501(c)(4)s and Political Organizations*, by Holly Schadler. The website also has useful fact sheets on various topics.

[www.bolderadvocacy.org/resource/the-connection-strategies-for-creating-and-operating-501c3s-501c4s-and-political-organizations/](http://www.bolderadvocacy.org/resource/the-connection-strategies-for-creating-and-operating-501c3s-501c4s-and-political-organizations/)

And here are the FEC’s own instructions on setting up a federal PAC: [www.fec.gov/help-candidates-and-committees/registering-pac/](http://www.fec.gov/help-candidates-and-committees/registering-pac/)

## Politics and Vigilance: Election-Year Risks and Your Nonprofit

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If you lead a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and you need to do political activity, you can set up an affiliated 501(c)(4) organization. There are tons of (c)(3)s with companion (c)(4)s. Tax laws are there to help you color inside the lines and help you carry out your mission via related organizations. Your affiliated (c)(4) can even set up a PAC.

### NRMC: Where does advocacy for accountability, and lobbying activity cross the line? Can you give us an example of the risk involved for a 501(c)(3) nonprofit?

**CL:** One of the things that people often do, or try to do, is offer to take Congressional staff members or elected officials out to lunch, or offer other benefits that could be impermissible benefits under a certain rule, like the House Gift Rule. Rules related to gifts are in place at the federal and state levels. Although it's understandable that you want to give a

legislator a token gift to thank them for helping out with an issue, if that gift has a monetary value you could wind up afoul of the rules. Even a private statement of thanks could be a derailment if it violates gift rules. Your organization's attorney or accountant should be consulted for guidance.

For those who are interested, Alliance for Justice has staff attorneys who conduct workshops and offer one-on-one technical assistance. Coaching is available to individuals and organizations that want to make their voices heard, but also informs them where the lines are drawn.

### NRMC: Thank you, Cindy.

Glenn Mott is a Senior Consultant for the Nonprofit Risk Management Center, and a partner at New Narrative North America, a media and communications firm with offices in New York and Hong Kong.

## The House Gift Rule

The following is an excerpt from the Ethics Committee describing the House Gift Rule. According to the House Gift Rule:

"... a Member, officer, or employee may not knowingly accept any gift except as provided in the rule. The rule is comprehensive, i.e., a House Member or staff person may not accept anything of value from anyone – whether in one's personal life or one's official life – unless acceptance is allowed under one of the rule's provisions."

## What is a Gift?

The rule defines the term "gift" in an extremely broad manner: "... a gratuity, favor, discount, entertainment, hospitality, loan, forbearance, or other item having

monetary value." [House Rule 25, clause 5(a)(2)(A).]

This provision goes on to state: "The term includes gifts of services, training, transportation, lodging, and meals, whether provided in kind, by purchase of a ticket, payment in advance, or reimbursement after the expense has been incurred."

Adhering to the Spirit of the Rule: "Under the House Code of Official Conduct, Members and staff must adhere to the spirit as well as the letter of the Rules of the House (House Rule XXIII, clause 2). To repeatedly accept gifts valued at under \$10 from a source would violate the spirit of the gift rule and hence be impermissible."

SOURCE: Committee of Ethics of the U.S. House of Representatives, <https://ethics.house.gov/gifts/house-gift-rule>

## Stronger Together

Wondering what your organization can do? Count your strengths and remember the power of the nonprofit sector. Nonprofits represent over 5 percent of national GDP and 10 percent of the workforce in the United States, accounting for over 14.4 million jobs, paying nearly \$635 billion in annual wages to workers, according to the most recent data. The potential economic impact and political influence of the nonprofit sector should not be underestimated, even by the smallest organization.

We've said it before, a culture of risk avoidance is an organizational drag. Shaping the public debate and public policy on social issues is an important function of most nonprofits. Use your expertise to ensure that the legal and political environment in which your organization operates is fair, informed, and open to hearing the issues that are important to your mission. By weighing in on legislation that both promotes and threatens your mission, your organization lays the groundwork for more nonprofits to advocate effectively on behalf of their communities.

For further reading on this subject from NRMC, see "How to Lose Your 501c3 Tax-Exempt Status Without Really Trying," at: <https://nonprofitrisk.org/resources/articles/how-to-lose-your-501c3-tax-exempt-status-without-really-trying/>



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# Case Studies

**1 Engagement Goal: Elevating and integrating ad-hoc conversations about risk-taking and risk management into durable planning and decision-making processes**

**WHO:** A national foundation working to strengthen democracy and promote the health, diversity, and resilience of democratic processes and institutions.

**Results:** The NRMCM team worked in partnership with foundation leaders to identify and unpack critical risks. The project culminated with a workshop exploring the topics of risk assessment and risk appetite. The NRMCM team will be returning to the organization later this year to facilitate follow-up training for a broader staff team.

**2 Engagement Goal: Interim Risk Leadership**

**WHO:** A regional transit agency employing more than 1,200 staff.

**Results:** The engagement involved leading and motivating staff working in claims management and safety and partnering with the agency's top executives to envision a new structure for the risk team. NRMCM's work included managing contacts with the agency's external broker and defense counsel and facilitating the vetting and appointment of a new Third-Party Administrator (TPA). The NRMCM team also led the search process for a new risk leader and developed a new risk dashboard to elevate and strengthen risk oversight.

**3 Engagement Goal: Development of an engaging website housing custom risk resources for the organization's member agencies**

**WHO:** A national organization of 1,000 affiliated agencies dedicated to fighting poverty in the U.S.

**End Result:** The NRMCM team developed an attractive website featuring two interactive web applications. These applications present content fully customized for the association. The site also has easily accessible web links to NRMCM Affiliate Member benefits. These resources help the organization's affiliated agencies develop a deeper awareness of the risks they face and identify practical steps to close gaps in risk practice. More than 95% of the organization's affiliated agencies have used the site to complete a Risk Assessment and demonstrate compliance with national quality standards.

**4 Engagement Goal: Thoughtful bidding process to identify and select the best-qualified firm to provide insurance**

**WHO:** A regional public health organization with more than 1,700 employees serving nearly 200,000 consumers.

**End Result:** The NRMCM team facilitated and managed a Broker Selection Process for the agency motivated by the commitment to ensure that insurance dollars were allocated wisely. The NRMCM team designed a custom RFP, identified and pre-qualified bidders, reviewed incoming proposals based on the client's criteria, and coordinated interviews with the six finalist firms. At the end of the process, the client selected a new broker and entered into a multi-year broker services agreement.

**FIND THE ANSWER HERE | [NONPROFITRISK.ORG](https://nonprofitrisk.org)**

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## Contentious Conversations: Talking Politics at Work

Is civil discourse creating a toxic environment in your workplace? According to the Society for Human Resource Management's (SHRM) Politics at Work Survey, deepening divisiveness across party lines is a catalyst for workplace conflict, which often results in lower productivity, employee alienation, poor morale, increased stress for individual workers, and claims of employer discrimination, harassment, or retaliation. Nonprofit employers can do more to effectively manage disruptive political debates that increasingly occur at work.

SHRM's Spring 2020 edition of *HR Magazine* tackles contentious political conversations in the workplace in its article, "Uncivil Discourse." Author Susan Milligan shares how toxic these talks have: "...gone far beyond setting rules about whether employees should be permitted to wear T-shirts or buttons supporting political candidates. It's much more personal, with people feeling threatened about not just their choice of candidate but their very value systems."

Take the following steps to maintain an inclusive work environment while managing the risks of politically driven discord.

### 1. Accept that politically charged conversations will happen at work.

Instead of censoring employees or trying to prevent these disagreements, focus on fostering peaceful, productive dialogue while preventing escalation and negative outcomes.

**2. Understand state and local laws that govern the political activity of your workers.** [Explore some of the laws](#) that protect employees based on their political affiliations, expressions, and other activities. Some jurisdictions prohibit employers from retaliating against employees for engaging in political activities; others prohibit discrimination against employees for election-related speech or party affiliation. Multi-state employers need to craft custom policies in order to

satisfy the various laws that apply to them. Don't forget to account for one of the major exceptions to an employer's ability to restrict speech and expression at work: the [National Labor Relations Act \(NLRA\)](#), which protects an employee's ability to discuss wages, hours, and working conditions. For example, under the NLRA, an employee's workplace speech is likely protected when urging peers to vote for a candidate who supports higher wages or improvements to working conditions.

### 3. Ensure that employees know their rights. Employees might misconstrue the protections they enjoy under the First Amendment.

While the First Amendment prevents the government from restricting free speech, it does not protect individual expression of political views in private workplaces. In fact, the First Amendment does not protect any type of speech in a private workplace. Private employers are generally allowed to set rules about what speech is acceptable at work, and employers can fire at-will employees for any or no reason—potentially including an employee's political views—except a reason or basis specifically prohibited by federal, state or local law. Discrimination based on political activity is often lawful, unless it violates one of the federal, state or local laws that protects an employee's political speech or activity in the workplace (see #2 above).

### 4. Provide guidelines to employees for keeping political discourse appropriate and respectful.

Some experts recommend avoiding a discussion of politics during employee training, but others recognize the need to inform employees what constitutes workplace harassment versus political disagreement. Consider educating employees about how to avoid [blatantly hateful rhetoric](#) or political expressions that border on hostile or discriminatory speech. Share why this type of speech is unproductive and unacceptable at work, whether it borders on illegal discrimination, creates a toxic work environment, or cultivates a workplace culture of exclusion that stunts contribution, creativity and collaboration. Provide real-life examples for employees to

learn from, preparing them to manage or avoid the most polarizing political issues, which have the highest potential of instigating disruptive conflict. Teach employees to recognize and shut down the types of political expression that could be interpreted as harassment or baiting. Also educate employees about the potential consequences of sharing political opinions online. Posting on personal social media accounts outside of work hours could still put an employee's reputation—and that of their organization—at risk in the eyes of a colleague or client. Share [these simple tips](#) to help your team navigate political small talk, and help individuals [weigh the consequences](#) of chiming in.

**5. Encourage inclusion and diversity of thought.** Extreme partisanship leads many Americans to demonize one another based on political affiliations alone. Provide opportunities for team members to cooperate and learn about each other as colleagues rather than political opponents. Showcase individual team members for their contributions to your organization's mission, helping colleagues recognize each other as allies and as multidimensional—not just politically motivated—people. Every effort to inject empathy and mutual respect back into the workplace will have a positive effect on the outcomes of political discourse.

**6. Cultivate civic engagement beyond party affiliations.** If your employees demonstrate a passion for politics or care for causes that shape their country, then engage them in specific civic pursuits appropriate for the workplace. Ask for volunteers to design non-partisan internal communications about voter registration and upcoming elections. Provide volunteering opportunities that allow employees to serve causes they care about while cooperating with colleagues and building morale. Especially if employees are disappointed about restrictions of political speech or political paraphernalia in the workplace, offering alternative avenues for civic service will satisfy employee needs while keeping the peace at work.





## Engage: Inspiring Voter Participation and Engagement

By Whitney Claire Thomey

Elected officials have a direct influence on fundamental issues related to our quality of life. These issues encompass everything from the minimum wage to the availability of funding for community-supported programs, from investments in vital infrastructure to the staffing of public safety agencies. Changes in the political landscape can have a significant impact on the ability of nonprofits to pursue their charitable missions. So, it shouldn't be surprising that political developments are of great interest to the leaders of nonprofit organizations.

Federal tax-exempt status is a privilege enjoyed by more than a million nonprofit organizations; it enables nonprofits to make greater investments in their missions and communities than would be possible if federal income taxes were due. Because of tax-exempt status, however, nonprofit

organizations must be vigilant to the types of activities in which they participate.

An essential element in the health and processes of our democratic system is voter engagement. According to [NonprofitVote.org](http://NonprofitVote.org), engaged voters help nonprofits enjoy “more access to elected officials, increased clout on issues, and are better positioned to advance their mission.” Therefore, despite the risks associated with crossing the boundaries of what a tax-exempt charity is permitted to say and do, voter engagement is an area where nonprofits should participate. They can safely do so with minimal risk to their tax-exempt status by following nonpartisan guidelines.

### Voter Registration: Barriers to Turnout

Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan ‘fact tank,’ [conducted a survey](#) aimed at voter

registration and turnout in 2016. They reported that in the US, voter turnout among registered voters is relatively high (86.8% in 2016). However, the number of citizens of *eligible voting age registered to vote* is sadly much lower than other democratic countries (70% in 2016). What are the possible reason for our lagging status when it comes to the participation of eligible voters? One reason is the prevailing view in the US that voter registration is an *individual responsibility* versus a required one.

Only 13% of the world's democratic nations espouse compulsory voting. However, countries such as Belgium have required citizens to vote since 1893 and Australia instituted the practice in 1924 (source: [idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout/compulsory-voting](http://idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout/compulsory-voting)). In addition to compulsory voting requirements, Belgium

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**“In a democratic nation, high voter activity results in the selection of candidates that are the most representative of the community’s needs and desires.”**

also employs automatic voter registration: a perfunctory process where all eligible citizens over 18 receive a voter registration card and poll location information. In the United States, three states (California, Oregon, and West Virginia) provide automatic registration through their respective Departments of Motor Vehicles (DMV). In the other 47 states, however, barriers to registration accessibility continue to contribute to the low number of registered voters, especially in areas with larger minority populations.

In a democratic nation, high voter activity results in the selection of candidates that are the most representative of the community’s needs and desires.

In turn, these candidates are responsive to their constituents and the issues that are important to them. While Presidential elections often receive the highest voter turnouts, results of races for local elected officials often lead to the most change in our lives and communities. Therefore, combatting nonvoting at all levels of the democratic system is an issue that should be top-of-mind for nonprofits.

**In the Know: Understand Voter Registration Rules in Your State**

States governments determine rules and processes related to voter registration and differences between them are the norm. [Vote411.org](http://Vote411.org) has extensive resources that

outline registration deadlines, how voters can register, and when the next election will take place. [NonprofitVOTE.org](http://NonprofitVOTE.org) also offers a resource guide to voting procedures in all 50 states.

**Eligibility**

One barrier to voter engagement is misunderstandings about voter eligibility. Some groups may *assume* (incorrectly) that they are excluded from the voting public. If your nonprofit supports vulnerable groups such as people who are homeless or in transitional housing, individuals with felony convictions, foreign language speakers, or people struggling with mental health, be aware that some of your clients may not fully understand their eligibility to vote. Understand that your state’s eligibility laws for these special populations may be different from the laws of a neighboring state. Learn more about eligibility in your state here:

- US Vote Foundation, State Voting Requirements & Information ([usvotefoundation.org/vote/sviddomestic.htm](http://usvotefoundation.org/vote/sviddomestic.htm))
- National Alliance on Mental Health, #Vote4MentalHealth ([nami.org/Get-Involved/Take-Action-on-Advocacy-Issues/Vote4MentalHealth/Know-Your-Voting-Rights](http://nami.org/Get-Involved/Take-Action-on-Advocacy-Issues/Vote4MentalHealth/Know-Your-Voting-Rights))
- [ProCon.org](http://ProCon.org), State Felon Voting Laws ([felonvoting.procon.org/state-felon-voting-laws/](http://felonvoting.procon.org/state-felon-voting-laws/))

**B-E Unbiased!**

Educate staff and volunteers on ways to assist your participants, consumers, and clients without injecting partisan viewpoints. Hosting nonpartisan voter registration activities also means being cognizant that events aren’t being restricted to targeted areas of your community based on a strategy to influence the outcome of an election. [Independent Sector](#) recommends maintaining strict

**Engage: Inspiring Voter Participation and Engagement**

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**“By increasing awareness, making registration accessible, and fostering voter engagement your organization can influence our democratic process in a way that will benefit our country as well as your vital mission.”**

compliance with Federal Election Commission rules by posting a sign that explicitly signals your nonprofit’s impartiality. For example:

“These voter registration services are available *without regard to the voter’s political preference*. Information and other assistance regarding registering or voting, including transportation and other services offered, shall not be withheld or refused on the basis of support for or opposition to particular candidates or a particular party.”

### **Voter Education & Issue Advocacy**

During an election season, issues or platforms advocated by candidates often motivate voters to register and show up at the polls. Issue advocacy is, therefore, a fertile opportunity for nonprofits. To reduce the downside risks associated with issue advocacy, remember that nonpartisanship should be the central nervous system of your efforts. By following some basic guidelines, nonprofit organizations can

play a pivotal role in educating voters and potential voters about the issues that are crucial to their community-serving missions. So how can your organization talk about the issues without treading into tricky territories?

First, consider how voter education activities relate to your mission. It can be easy to venture into biased territory if your organization’s mission becomes a hot-button topic in an upcoming election. Don’t produce materials that appear to

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endorse only candidates who “correctly” answer questions. Do include responses from all candidates, publish their answers with no editing or paraphrasing (in the same font and font size) and resolve to maintain maximum impartiality. Remember to pose open-ended questions! This format prevents candidates from simply answering “support or oppose” to issues and allows candidates to elaborate on their positions on the issues and concerns that matter to your mission.

## Get The Vote Out Campaigns

Nonprofit VOTE published a report in 2015 examining the impact that nonprofit organizations had on voter turnout in both the 2012 Presidential election year and the 2014 midterm elections. One result highlighted in this study showed that “... the outreach of nonprofits resulted in above-average turnout rates across all demographics, most strikingly among young and low propensity voters not expected to turn out.” Many nonprofits extended their efforts beyond voter registration activities and used tools like voter pledge cards for constituents and clients that were already registered. Try these three tactics for a successful Get Out the Vote (GOTV) campaign.

### 1. Start organizing early and name a program leader for all GOTV

**activities.** Your planning process should start a minimum of 30 days before an election, but there’s no need to wait! Begin as soon as you can. Also, make sure that your GOTV program has someone to lead the charge. Too many cooks in the kitchen can create chaos. Identify someone in your organization who faithfully carries a torch for democracy and ask that individual to help design your program to motivate voters.

### 2. Catalog supporters and make lists

**lists.** First, determine how far-reaching your GOTV campaign will be; how many potential voters will you try to reach? Next, start making lists of anyone who will be participating in the campaign: staff, volunteers, clients, participants, members, or even team members from your branch offices, affiliates and partner organizations. Keep lists of any clients and constituents with whom your organization connects!

### 3. Focus on connections and relationships with potential voters

**voters.** The people that your nonprofit interfaces with regularly may be among those who are overlooked by political campaigns and candidates for public office. By encouraging these low propensity

voter groups to exercise their voting privilege, voter turnout increases, and our democracy stands stronger. It’s your connection to these groups that make your advocacy stand out. Personal and authentic interactions make the most impact. The individuals and communities you serve will appreciate encouragement from your staff and volunteers and are far more likely to act when you invite them to do so, versus simply receiving a mass email from a partisan group. Reach out with a “voter pledge” campaign and ask how your organization can help make voting more accessible to your clients, participants, and consumers. Remember, the message that you want to send to your community is nonpartisan and straightforward. Voting matters! By increasing awareness, making registration accessible, and fostering voter engagement, your organization can influence our democratic process in a way that will benefit our country as well as your vital mission.

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Whitney Thomey is Project Manager at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions about any of the topics covered in this article at 703.777.3504 or [Whitney@nonprofitrisk.org](mailto:Whitney@nonprofitrisk.org).

## Resources

- “A 501(c)(3) Guide: General Rules,” NonprofitVOTE ([nonprofitvote.org/nonprofits-voting-elections-online/general-rules/](http://nonprofitvote.org/nonprofits-voting-elections-online/general-rules/))
- “Candidate Questionnaires and Voter Guides,” Bolder Advocacy ([bolderadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Candidate\\_Questionnaires\\_and\\_Voter\\_Guides.pdf](http://bolderadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Candidate_Questionnaires_and_Voter_Guides.pdf))
- “Engaging New Voters: The Impact of Nonprofit Voter Outreach on Client and Community Turnout,” NonprofitVOTE ([nonprofitvote.org/documents/2015/12/engaging-new-voters.pdf/](http://nonprofitvote.org/documents/2015/12/engaging-new-voters.pdf/))
- “Lessons from GOTV experiments,” Yale ISPS ([isps.yale.edu/node/16698](http://isps.yale.edu/node/16698))
- “Voter Engagement Toolkit for Community Foundations,” Council on Foundations ([cof.org/sites/default/files/documents/files/Community-Foundation-Voter-Engagement-Toolkit.pdf](http://cof.org/sites/default/files/documents/files/Community-Foundation-Voter-Engagement-Toolkit.pdf))

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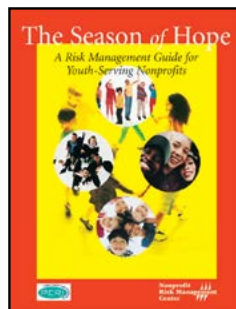
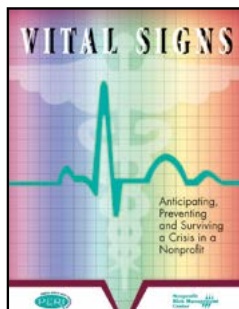
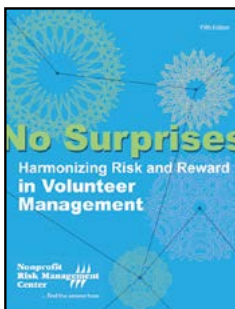
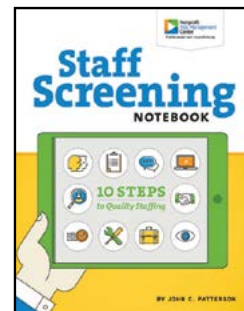
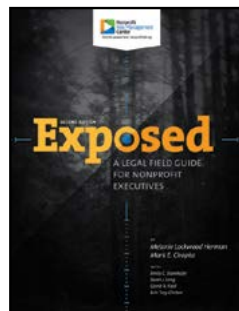
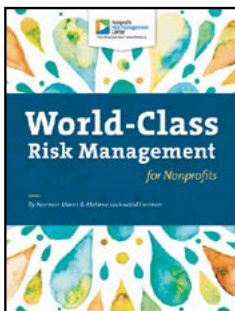
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