



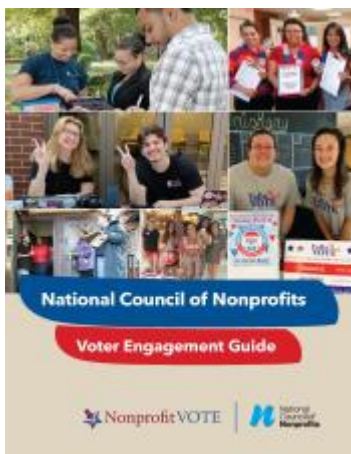
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# Engage and learn about your candidates. Then go vote.

By: Tiffany Gourley Carter

Now's the time to be talking to candidates, learning about their priorities, and focusing their attention on the needs of your communities. Whether you are hosting or attending events, charitable nonprofits play an important role in nonpartisan candidate engagement so you, your community, and even your candidates are more educated in the voting booth.



Click the image to see the full guide.

Sharing policy ideas with candidates is paramount to informing them about needs and solutions in their communities and to encourage them to have a robust agenda if/when they are elected. Some ways nonprofits can engage with candidates and remain nonpartisan are by inviting them to events, hosting candidate forums, or conducting candidate questions. Below are some tips and hints from the [Nonprofit Nonpartisan Voter Engagement Guide](#) on how nonprofits can remain nonpartisan in each of those circumstances.

And if it's too late to put on your own candidate event, we suggest attending a local event and asking questions. We have recommendations for that too.

## Inviting Candidates to Your Event

During the election season, a candidate may appear at your nonprofit event in one of three ways:

1. In their capacity as a candidate invited to your event,
2. In their capacity as a public figure invited to your event, or
3. As an uninvited attendee at a public event.

Each scenario has different guidelines to ensure that their appearance is consistent with, rather than threatens, your organization's nonpartisanship. For example, if you invite candidates to the *same* event, you'll need to invite *all* candidates and if you invite candidates to *different* events you have to give them equal opportunities in terms of time, venue, and format. Regardless of whether they are being invited to speak or just attend, reminding them that yours is an entirely nonpartisan event and must be kept free of campaign activities is extremely important.

For a deeper breakdown of each type of appearance, see the [Nonprofit Nonpartisan Voter Engagement Guide](#).

## Hosting a Candidate Forum

Charitable organizations can host nonpartisan candidate forums. They provide ideal opportunities for candidates to share their priorities while nonprofits educate them on the needs of residents and organizations in their communities. Basic guidelines for staying nonpartisan include:

- The forum should cover a broad range of issues.
- Candidates should have equal time to present their views.
- The candidates are asked about issues but are not asked to pledge to or agree with specific positions of the sponsoring organizations.
- The moderator stays neutral and does not imply approval or disapproval of the candidates.

The [Nonprofit Nonpartisan Voter Engagement Guide](#) provides more information on inviting the candidates, questions, ground rules inside the forum, literature, what the candidates want, selecting a format, and logistics and publicizing.

Some state associations, like the [CT Community Nonprofit Alliance](#) and [Kentucky Nonprofit Network](#), are hosting candidate forums open to the public in October. The Alliance has already conducted two in different parts of the state as “an opportunity for nonprofits to meet their local candidates ..., hear their priorities, and educate them about the issues that are important to nonprofits.” KNN’s [Meet the Candidates & Council](#), organized in partnership with the Lexington Nonprofit Coalition at the Lyric Theatre & Cultural Arts Center, will allow attendees to “hear from ... candidates & sitting members on issues of importance to nonprofits.”

For even more recommendations, check out the [Nonprofit Nonpartisan Election Tip | Candidate Forums](#) about how effective forums can be in steering candidates to consider what really matters to nonprofits. In the video, David Heinen of the **North Carolina Center for Nonprofits** tells the story of a candidate coming up to him after one successful forum and candidly sharing:

“I spent the last two days studying and learning about the issues that matter to people in the community. ... If I’m elected as a state legislator, this is what the people who are going to be my constituents are going to care about. So, I have learned by preparing for this forum what my job would be if I get elected.”

Remote video URL

## Conducting a Candidate Questionnaire

As the [Nonprofit Nonpartisan Voter Engagement Guide](#) explains, “Candidate questionnaires serve two purposes. First, they collect information about the candidates for voters. Second, they let candidates know the range of issues of

concern to the organization(s) preparing the guide.” Factors to consider while remaining nonpartisan include:

- Do the questions cover a broad range of issues related to the broad interests of the electorate?
- Are the questions or any description of the issues clear and unbiased in both structure and content?
- Are the questions posed to candidates identical to the questions you later publicly print or post online? (They should be.)
- Are the candidates given a reasonable amount of time to respond?
- If the questions ask the candidates to respond with “Yes” or “No” or “Undecided,” are candidates given the opportunity to give short one or two sentence explanations to explain their positions in their own words?
- Have all major candidates responded?

This year the [CT Community Nonprofit Alliance](#) asked all candidates running for the state legislature to answer three straightforward questions about the candidates’ experience with nonprofits, support for increased funding for nonprofits, and modernizing the budget process. All answers are provided to the public in their entirety with options for the candidates to include additional comments. Basic candidate information such as party, district, and campaign website are provided for readers to learn more.

Whether your nonprofit is conducting the survey or you are reading the answers to become more informed, consider the nonpartisan nature required by nonprofits compared to other questionnaires candidates receive. The answers may provide better understanding of how engaged the candidates are and their willingness to work with organizations serving their communities.

## **Attending an Event**

Too late to start planning? Take the opportunity to attend an event already happening in your community to learn for yourself and share with your staff, board, volunteers, and those you serve. Check your local community bulletin boards and newspapers to see if a candidate forum or townhall is being held in your town. A quick google search of “candidate forum” plus your city/town usually does the trick as well.



Once there, take the opportunity to pose a question and steer the conversation towards your organization and nonprofit priorities affecting your community. Or, if you find yourself chatting with a candidate via a phone call or door knock, here are some ready-made options from the [Delaware Alliance for Nonprofit Advancement](#) to get you started:

1. Nonprofits provide essential services on behalf of government but are often paid below market rate for these services. How do you plan to address this inequity?
2. How do you intend to involve nonprofits and the communities they serve in the policy making process?
3. Nonprofits are small businesses that directly impact the economy while delivering positive social outcomes. How do you plan to invest in the nonprofit sector?

These great events and opportunities give your nonprofit and the people you serve the chance to get to know your candidates and share with them the great work you are doing in the community. Take advantage of them all. Then go vote.

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*This article is part of a series on how to utilize the [Nonprofit Nonpartisan Voter Engagement Guide](#) between now and Election Day.*