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## Yes, It's Okay to Ask

Contrary to the assumptions of some, election season isn't a time for charitable nonprofits to lay low and avoid engaging with candidates for public office lest they be considered acting in a partisan manner. True, nonprofit nonpartisanship is the law and the smart way to maintain public trust. But the number of days before an election doesn't define when or whether nonprofits can ask politicians what they think. Indeed, when is better than while candidates are seeking votes? A tried, true, and tested technique for parsing what politicians truly believe is the Candidate Questionnaire.

The **North Carolina Center for Nonprofits** regularly asks candidates for Congress and the state legislature to [complete a three-question survey](#). By design these are relatively generic, asking about the candidates' personal experiences with charitable nonprofits, their top three policy priorities, and, after identifying the state association of nonprofits' policy agenda, which goals the candidates would "most enthusiastically" support and why. Importantly, as [a matter of law to remain nonpartisan](#), all candidates are invited to complete the survey.

How the Center promotes participation is also a compelling story of nonprofit advocacy. After sending the candidate questionnaire to all candidates, and reiterating the invitation to those who haven't responded, the state association also engages its members throughout the state to make the ask.

A recent member message explained, “Reaching out to your candidates is a great way to build stronger relationships with the people who will represent you at the state and federal levels of government.” Another key point, “Asking them to respond to the candidate questionnaire makes it easy because it gives you a concrete reason to be in touch with them and these resources make this a fast action.”

The North Carolina Center also pointed out, “By reaching out during election season, you’re demonstrating that you’re an engaged voter and you want to have an ongoing relationship with your elected officials in your capacity as a nonprofit leader. In short, you’re setting yourself up for success down the line when your organization wants legislative support for policies that will benefit the people you serve.”

Collectively, the actions of many nonprofits –multiple constituents asking candidates to complete the questionnaire – can demonstrate both the breadth and awareness of the sector. Or as the state association of nonprofits phrased it, “More broadly, you’re setting all of us working in the nonprofit sector up for greater success, especially when it comes time to push for policies that will benefit us all. When legislators know their constituents care about these issues, they’re more receptive to us – and when we know which of our concerns are their top priorities, we’re better equipped to build the support we need to get legislative wins.”

To make it easy for nonprofits to connect with the candidates in their jurisdictions, the Center created a [template message](#) and an [interactive county map](#).

The engagement of the North Carolina Center for Nonprofits is just one example. The **Maine Association of Nonprofits** (MANP) also invited candidates for public office to [share their experiences and priorities for the nonprofit sector](#). In its nonpartisanship statement, MANP clarified that its goal is to “educate candidates by making them aware of the impact and potential of the nonprofit sector, and to educate voters by soliciting information directly from candidates on how they would partner with the sector if elected.”

This summer, the **Pennsylvania Association of Nonprofit Organizations** (PANO) included a [guide to candidate questionnaires](#) in its list of allowable activities in which charitable nonprofits can engage. PANO also has questionnaires for Pennsylvania candidates running for [state office](#) and [Congress](#). Candidates have until September 30 to share the policies that will support nonprofit employers, address government

grants and contract challenges, and ensure nonprofits can continue to operate in their communities.

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Candidate questionnaires from charitable nonprofits have to be more generic than those posted by noncharitable nonprofit interest groups like business associations, labor unions, and social welfare nonprofits. For more information, check out [Bolder Advocacy's Candidate Questionnaires](#) and [Nonprofit VOTE's Candidate Questionnaires and Voter Guides](#).