



Election series: Non-partisan advocacy during elections



Introduction

One of the ways nonprofits can meaningfully engage in federal, provincial, and municipal elections is by advocating for the issues that matter to their communities, the nonprofit sector, and their organization. Advocacy is a powerful catalyst for change, and elections particularly provide meaningful opportunities for nonprofits to advance nonprofit driven public policy.

Elections often mark the start of a significant shift in public policy as political parties and candidates share their visions for the future. A shift in public policy not only impacts nonprofits as organizations, but also the issues that they and their communities care about. Many of the issues that nonprofits care about require systemic changes through public policy that address their underlying causes.

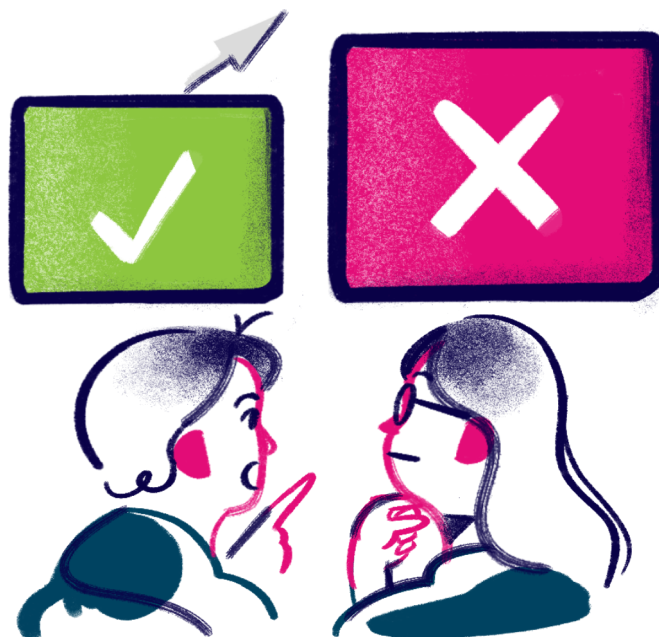
These can be legislative, regulatory, and/or budget and bylaws related. For example, policies related to affordable housing and community well-being can play a key role in addressing food insecurity and impact people who access food banks. Check out these [10 advocacy efforts by nonprofits in Canada](#) that led to tangible public policy change - from big to small!

Rules of engagement

Did you know that nonprofits can participate in advocacy? We can, even during election seasons. And now more than ever, we need more nonprofits leaning into their role in protecting and activating democracy.

Depending on the jurisdiction of the election (federal, provincial, municipal), different rules apply. Learn the rules around advocacy in three relevant areas:

1. Canada Revenue Agency Regulations (for registered charities only) and;
2. Lobbying rules in the jurisdiction the election is taking place.
3. Third-party Advertising rules in the jurisdiction the election is taking place.



Leverage the power of networks

Election engagement is a great opportunity to activate and build networks, coalitions, and partnerships around common issues and solutions. Consider using a network approach to distribute power and resources, organize collectively, and mobilize leadership across groups. A network approach can also increase inclusion by engaging new people in advocacy efforts, such as those who know the advocacy issue well based on their lived experiences, and those who will be impacted by decisions related to the issues.

Tips on activating and building networks, coalitions, and partnerships:

- Connect with likely and unlikely allies.
- Surface and align on common issues, solutions, and key messages. Remember, there does not need to be consensus on everything, but just one common issue, solution, and key message that ensures the collective tactic or a set of individual tactics are rowing in the same direction.
- Decide on a collective advocacy tactic and/or coordinate and connect individual tactics organizations might be taking on. Braided together, the different strands form a stronger and more sustainable campaign than any individual thread.
- Activate your plan by asking who can lead on what part (e.g. research, communications, data, community engagement) and what resources people can pool.
- Debrief and repeat for another issue!

In this way skills of individuals and groups are strengthened and collective power building emerges that can last beyond one advocacy issue.

Election advocacy through candidate engagement

Did you know that nonprofits are allowed to engage with candidates during elections? Connecting with candidates in ridings and wards where your organization is located or offers services and programs is a good place to start, as your organization and the communities you serve are considered constituents and potential voters.

Candidate engagement is an effective way for nonprofits to:

- Alert candidates to what their constituents care about, which may impact their priorities both during the election and after they are elected.
- Build early relationships with policymakers. The candidates who are running during elections could become potential high-ranking elected officials. For example, at the federal and provincial level Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs) can become cabinet ministers while at the municipal level councillors can be deputy mayors and part of regional councils.
- Gain valuable insights. By having conversations with candidates, nonprofits can get a better sense of how their issues and/or solutions resonate with candidates. This also gives the organization an opportunity to further answer any questions candidates may have around a specific issue.

There are many different ways to engage with candidates, from individual meetings, to town halls and events. Some actions individual organizations can take on while others are better suited for networks and coalitions.

Tactic	Opportunity	Considerations	Levels of resources required
<p>Host an all candidates forum.</p>	<p>Nonprofits are well-positioned to host forums and increase public understanding of the election process, and raise the issues communities care about with candidates.</p>	<p>Candidates are usually more willing to attend when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • they have clear positions on issues • they expect a large audience • there is a guarantee of neutrality. 	<p>High</p>
<p>Share resources and background materials with candidates.</p>	<p>This is a great way to educate candidates about your issues, your constituency, or your community. Candidates rely on you to educate them about your issues.</p>	<p>You may share research and your policy priorities with candidates, and ensure that the same information is available to all candidates.</p>	<p>Medium</p>

Tactic	Opportunity	Considerations	Levels of resources required
<p>Coordinate meetings with individual candidates.</p>	<p>These meetings can be helpful when a candidate's opinion is different from yours - to let the candidate know that there is an alternative and organized viewpoint.</p>	<p>Make sure to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare talking points, issues, briefs, fact sheets, etc. • Keep it brief and use plain language. • Anticipate their questions. • Send thank you letters, including contact information for further questions, and follow-up with summary notes, actions items, etc. • Meet with more than just one candidate. 	<p>Medium</p>
<p>Attend candidate forums hosted by others.</p>	<p>Many of these forums provide opportunities for questions from those in attendance - have your question prepared in case you have a chance to ask about your issue.</p>	<p>Be respectful of the organizer and make sure your issue is related to the topics being discussed.</p>	<p>Low</p>

Election advocacy through candidate engagement (cont'd)

Tips for requesting candidate meetings

- Do your research on the candidates before reaching out.
- Request a meeting to introduce your organization by sending a letter to the candidate or key campaign staff (campaign managers, volunteers, field organizers etc). Briefly outline your organization's work and key messages. Don't forget to follow-up as candidates are often out at campaign events.
- Set a date, time, and location for the meeting. Let the campaign staff know how much time you would like and be prepared to shorten the session if need be.
- Once a meeting is confirmed, put together a team to attend the meeting. For smaller organizations the team might include a combination of the Executive Director, board member, and community member. For bigger organizations the team may include policy staff as well. The larger the team, the more organized you will need to be at the meeting. It's helpful to have a mix of staff, board members and, if possible, members from the community who can provide personal stories of how key issues impact them and what solutions will support them. Inform the campaign staff about who will attend the meeting.

Election advocacy through candidate engagement (cont'd)

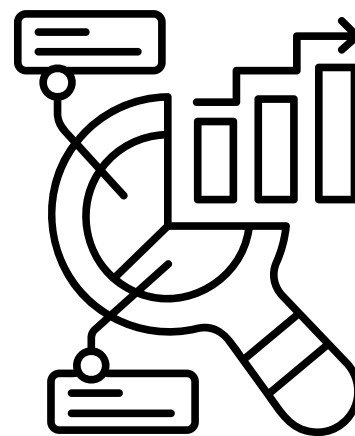
- Start the meeting by thanking the candidate and briefly outlining the purpose of the meeting and the agenda. All participants should introduce themselves. Be prepared to be flexible. The candidate may not have time or want to go through the full agenda. When this happens, go directly to your main points so that the most important items are discussed. Finish by thanking the candidate and providing a contact person for further questions or information.
- After the meeting, send a thank you note to the candidate, along with any additional helpful materials and reports. If they get elected, send them a congratulations letter to start another cycle of engagement.



Other ways to support advocacy during election season

If candidate engagement is not feasible, there are other vital ways to support advocacy during election season:

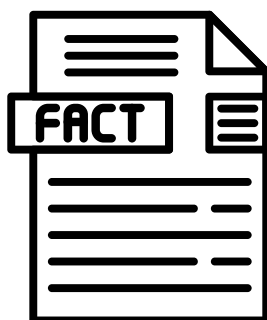
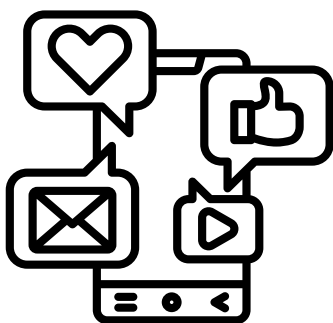
- Platform analysis: Reviewing party and candidate platforms, assessing what they have to say about issues important to your organization, nonprofits, and the local communities, and sharing that information with the public can be very valuable.
- Public awareness campaigns: Sharing stories and background materials through traditional and social media is a great way to increase understanding and awareness of your issues among candidates and the general public. You may oppose or support a policy, and you can keep your communications non-partisan by making sure you are not directly endorsing or supporting/opposing a single candidate or political party.



Crafting your messages during elections

Use storytelling in your communications. Use visuals and descriptive language to help create a picture of the solution you are proposing. Here are some additional tips when crafting your key messages:

- Make sure your content is objective, fact-based, and non-partisan.
- Engage your audience (communities, candidates, decision-makers etc.) in different ways: a message often needs to be heard multiple times through different avenues before it is remembered.
- Share information about the values of the nonprofit sector, including key messages.



Additional resources

- [338 Canada](#)
- [Building Community Power through Collaboration and Iteration in Policy](#) (Common Power)
- [Cooperatives and Mutuels Canada Advocacy Tools and Resources](#) (Co-operatives and Mutuels Canada)
- [ONN's Networks + Action Guide](#) (ONN)
- [Ontario for All Advocacy Tools](#) (Ontario for All)
- [Social Power: How Civil Society Can 'Play Big' and Truly Create Change](#) (Sheila McKechnie Foundation)
- [Tips for engaging with the media](#) (The Nonprofit Chamber)
- [Tools to Engage: Resources for Nonprofits](#) (Building Movement Project)
- [Nonprofit Power Up](#)

About ONN

ONN is the independent nonprofit network for the 58,000 nonprofits in Ontario, focused on policy, advocacy, and services to strengthen the sector as a key pillar of our society and economy. We work to create a public policy environment that allows nonprofits to thrive. We engage our network of diverse nonprofit organizations across Ontario to work together on issues affecting the sector and channel the voices of our network to government, funders and other stakeholders.

