

SNAP ELECTION SERIES

Election Advocacy

One of the ways nonprofits can meaningfully engage in snap elections is by **advocating for the issues they and their communities care about**. 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 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 related. For example, policies related to affordable housing and social welfare 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](#) (full access with email address) that led to tangible public policy change - from big to small!

Nonprofit Advocacy Quiz

Did you know that nonprofits in Ontario can participate in advocacy? We can! And now more than ever, we need more nonprofits [leaning into their role](#) in protecting and activating democracy.

Aren't there rules around advocacy for nonprofits? Yes. Test your knowledge with our [short quiz](#), and learn more about what the rules are. You may be surprised by the answers!

Ontario's Election Finances Act - Third party election advertising

Before the 2022 Ontario election, the Government of Ontario changed the Election Finances Act (s.37.10(2)) to extend the limits on how much third parties like nonprofits can spend on election advertising to include the election period and 12 months before the writ dropped. A union-led coalition successfully challenged this in the Ontario Superior Court and Ontario Court of Appeal, which struck down this rule about the spending limit in the pre-election period. The Government has appealed to the Supreme Court of Canada which heard the case in May of 2024 but has not yet given their decision. **In the meantime, the spending limit on the pre-election period does not apply.**

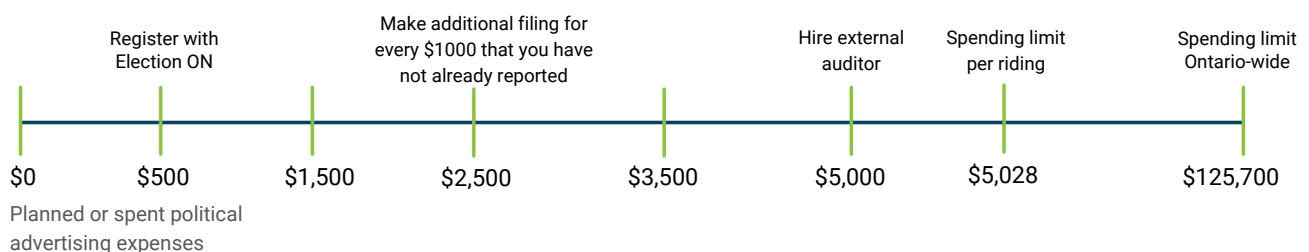
However, If an election is called before this government's term is up, the above court battle will not be relevant. This is because the spending limits during the pre-election period are only relevant when there is a fixed date election (i.e. an election that happens at the end of a government's full term). **For elections that happen before the end of a government's full term, there is no spending limit on third party advertising until the writ is dropped** (see [page 15](#) of the Election Finances CFO Handbook for Third Parties 2025).

Ontario's Election Finances Act: Obligations at Different Spending Thresholds

The following is general legal information not legal advice specific to your situation. Consult legal counsel as appropriate.

ELECTION PERIOD (when the election officially starts to last ballot day)

Compliance Obligations



JAN 16, 2025

Election advocacy through candidate engagement

Did you know that nonprofits are allowed to meet with candidates during elections? Meeting with candidates in ridings 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. A snap election can increase your chances of securing a meeting, given the candidates have a short amount of time to canvas and get to know their communities.

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 cabinet ministers of the new government, or your new elected official.

- Gain valuable insights. By having conversations with candidates you can get a better sense of how your issues and/or solutions resonate with candidates. This also gives you an opportunity to further answer any questions candidates may have around a specific issue.

Tips for reaching out to candidates

Asking for a meeting:

- Call, email or send a letter to the candidate or key campaign staff of each party briefly outlining your organization's work and your key messages. You can usually find candidate information - who has been nominated and who their staff is - on the parties' websites:
 - [Ontario Green Party](#)
 - [Ontario Liberal Party](#)
 - [Ontario NDP](#)
 - [Ontario PC](#)
- A list of [current MPPs](#) and their contact information is also available on the Legislative Assembly of Ontario's website. Many of them might be running as incumbents.
- Request a meeting to introduce your organization. Parties often have campaign staff - stakeholder director/manager/coordinator - or volunteers dedicated to engaging with constituents during election campaigns. Follow up with a phone call or email to the campaign manager. The campaign manager may handle the request or may refer you to another staff member. Negotiate 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.

Preparing for the meeting:

- 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.

- As a group, fine-tune the points that you will raise. The points can include information about your organization and its impact, a key issue you are concerned about and how it's showing up in your organization and community, and what potential recommendations you may have. Remember the meeting likely will not be longer than 30 minutes and you want your key messages to be clear and accessible. Prior to the meeting, organize your messages into an agenda or prep-note, and decide who will chair the session and who will speak to each item. The size of the group will guide how long individuals can speak. More experienced members can help others to organize what they will say. Write up the meeting notes when it's over so everyone has the results of the meeting on paper.

During the meeting:

- Thank the candidate and briefly outline 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, cut to the chase 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.



There are many different ways to engage with candidates, from individual meetings, to town halls and events. Our friends at [The Nonprofit Chamber](#) have created a great summary of the various formats and considerations.

Tactic	Opportunity	Considerations
<p>Host an all candidates forum.</p>	<p>Nonprofits are well-positioned to host forums and increase public understanding of the election process and candidates who are running.</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>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 at hand.</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>Attend 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

Here are some additional [tips](#) from the Nonprofit Chamber 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.

Use storytelling in your communications. Use visuals and descriptive language to help create a picture of the solution you are proposing.

If you do not feel comfortable directly engaging with candidates and political parties, there are other ways to advocate during election season as well. For example:

- Platform analysis and scorecards: Reviewing party platforms, assessing what they have to say about issues of importance to your nonprofit, and sharing that information with the public can be very valuable to people who care about the issues that your nonprofit works on.
- 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 communication non-partisan by making sure you are not directly endorsing or supporting/opposing a single candidate or political party.

Leverage the power of networks

Election engagement is a great opportunity to activate and build your networks, coalitions, and partnerships. Consider using a network approach to engage people.

A network approach can help identify common causes and messaging by different organizations and groups. This approach distributes power and resources to involve many people in amplifying the causes you have in common. It can help mobilize leadership, expanding opportunities for people to step into leadership positions. It can also increase inclusion by engaging new people in your advocacy efforts, such as those who know the issues you're advocating for from their lived experiences and those who will be impacted by decisions related to the issues.

Organizations and individuals can make effective policy changes through a number of actions, and no one action is sufficient on its own, nor is one necessarily better than another to influence and make policy change happen.

Additional resources

- [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)
- [Tools to Engage: Resources for Nonprofits](#) (Building Movement Project)

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.

For more information

Candice Zhang, Policy Advisor

Email: candice@theonncanada.ca

