

Civic Engagement and Charitable Nonprofit Organizations

Messaging and Response Guidance

April 6, 2026

Overview

Get Out the Vote (GOTV) is a targeted effort during an election cycle to encourage citizens across the country to participate in an election by showing up to vote. GOTV efforts are organized by nonprofit organizations using strategies such as door-knocking, phone banking, and SMS blasts to maximize voter turnout during early voting and on Election Day voting.

GOTV is a legally permitted activity for nonprofits. According to [federal law](#), 501(c)(3)s are permitted to engage in GOTV efforts, so long as they are nonpartisan, without reference to any candidate or political party. Nonprofits play a critical role in creating a healthy and vibrant society through their civic engagement activities. They educate the public on issues that relate to their missions, ensuring communities, the media, policymakers, and other stakeholders have access to important information. They engage voters through nonpartisan voter registration and get-out-the-vote work and by providing nonpartisan voter education.

Objective

This document provides NCN members with ***clear, confident messaging to affirm the legality, value, and nonpartisan history of nonprofit civic engagement*** and to demonstrate how to respond effectively if that work is challenged by the media or by federal, state, or local political leaders. These talking points and sample Q&A serve as a basis for organizations that may face scrutiny for engaging in GOTV efforts.

Our guidance is grounded in the importance of civic engagement across communities.

Key Messaging

Below are several talking points to help guide discourse if 501(c)(3)s get public scrutiny for GOTV efforts.

- Voter engagement isn't partisan. Conservative, progressive, faith-based, and community groups all do this work. More participation doesn't favor one side—it strengthens the system.
- Guardrails to protect against abuse have long been in place and should be enforced. Nonprofits are not allowed to support candidates or parties. Any 501(c)3 organization that violates the law and crosses the line to candidate or party endorsement should be scrutinized, investigated and held accountable for their violations. However, the vast majority of organizations properly and fairly participate in voter turnout efforts like GOTV. Nonprofits help people vote. They reach seniors, first-time voters, and rural communities; people who are often missed. This is about access, not politics.
- Efforts to prevent nonprofits from playing a role in voter turnout don't stop bad actors. They only minimize legitimate, community-based efforts that encourage people to participate in civic life.
- The impact of preventing nonprofits from engaging in voter turnout activity will hit hardest in traditionally underrepresented communities, leading to fewer voices and a less representative electorate.

What is Permitted by Law

- Nonprofit-led voter registration and GOTV efforts are focused on increasing civic participation, not on electing candidates.
- **501(c)(3) organizations are legally prohibited from partisan electoral activity.** The law is clear, and the solution for any alleged abuse is enforcement against bad actors—not collective punishment by eliminating programs that help millions of Americans participate more easily in our civic life.
- Nonprofits help people participate. Register voters. Share nonpartisan information. Encourage people to show up on Election Day. That's not campaigning; it's making sure the system is working by increasing participation.

What is the Value of GOTV

- Low voter turnout is a real problem. Too many people who can vote don't. Nonprofits help close that gap. In a democracy, more participation is a good thing.

- People who don't usually vote come from across the political spectrum. When more people show up, the outcome isn't predictable, and that's the point.
- Faith communities have long been involved in helping get more people registered and voting. That includes churches, synagogues, and evangelical denominations. They are trusted voices in communities.
- Restricting the charitable sector's role in voter engagement disproportionately affects disadvantaged voters across the political spectrum. Communities already facing barriers, often related to income and education, include both Republican and Democratic voters. When fewer people participate, the electorate becomes less representative.

Tough Questions & Responses

Q: Are nonprofits just engaging in GOTV efforts with Democratic voters?

Voter registration and GOTV efforts have historically produced gains for both parties. The surge in working-class voter participation that powered President Trump's 2016 victory was enabled in part by civic outreach infrastructure. President Obama's 2008 coalition was built on newly registered voters. Evangelical churches, Catholic organizations, and conservative faith communities have run voter mobilization campaigns for decades.

Q: How do we know these nonprofits are acting in a nonpartisan way?

The IRS and state officials have oversight authority and enforcement tools to investigate violations. Organizations found to be operating outside their permitted scope face loss of tax exemption, excise taxes, and other penalties. That accountability structure exists precisely to address the concern being raised. We support strong, consistent, and objective oversight.

Q: Doesn't tax-exempt status mean taxpayers are subsidizing political activity?

No, tax-exempt status is tied to nonpartisan conduct. A 501(c)(3) that engages in partisan electoral activity—favoring or opposing candidates or parties—can lose its exemption. The tax code supports civic engagement precisely because broad voter participation is a public benefit, not a partisan one.

Q: Isn't this just a Democratic-aligned sector protecting its own interests?

Nonprofits and 501(c)(3)s include hospitals, food banks, universities, faith communities, veterans' organizations, arts institutions, and thousands of local organizations that serve people of every political affiliation. Conservative and faith-based nonprofits have been among the most active in civic engagement for decades.

Q: Why should nonprofits be involved in elections at all?

Nonprofits aren't involved in elections; they're involved in democracy. Voter registration drives, civic education, and turnout efforts are not the same as campaigning. Nonprofits are often the most trusted institutions in the communities they serve, and civic participation requires trust. Removing them from this space would leave many Americans, particularly in low-income and rural communities, with far less support for accessing the ballot.

Resources

If you have any questions about navigating a media inquiry, please reach out to Natalia Vanegas, VP of Communications at NCN, at nvanegas@councilofnonprofits.org, or Trinity Foreman, Senior Communications Specialist, at tforeman@councilofnonprofits.org.