

How Nonprofits Can Advocate for Public Policy & Social Change

Lillian Finley : 5-6 minutes

It is a common misconception in the nonprofit sphere that tax-exempt organizations cannot practice advocacy for causes and ideas. However, history shows that nonprofit advocacy is responsible for much of our modern legal system, and [some in the sector say it's a key way that organizations can fulfill their missions](#). Organizations like Citizens United and many large labor unions are tax-exempt organizations whose past advocacy has played a critical role in shaping the U.S. political landscape. From landmark Supreme Court decisions to organizing voters and communities, the history of nonprofit advocacy in public policy is strong and allows charitable organizations to advance their causes on a massive scale.

What is advocacy?

[Advocacy](#) is taking a public stance on a social or political issue and engaging in activities that demonstrate this stance. In practice, it often takes the form of participating in protests, writing in to news organizations, spreading awareness and contacting representatives.

The goal of advocacy is to affect public opinion and the opinions of lawmakers. It can be a useful tool for organizations with missions that are strongly affected by local, state and federal law. For example, a nonprofit supporting the local LGBTQ+ population would have an interest in advocating for policies that support LGBTQ+ people throughout their state and nationally. Additionally, nonprofits' unique connections to their communities make them a particularly powerful force in advocating for the communities' needs with more organization and resources than individual community members may be able to.

One example of nonprofit advocacy comes from [One Arizona](#) — a nonpartisan charitable organization encouraging civic participation in Arizona. The organization practices grassroots government advocacy by helping community members register to vote, amplifying the messaging of partner organizations and building relationships within its community.

The history of nonprofit advocacy

Since the beginning of the 20th century, nonprofits have maintained a [prominent role](#) in working directly with the United States government to provide social services. Disease prevention, youth mentoring, support for the unhoused and other types of mandatory aid were often contracted out to nonprofit organizations such as the Red Cross and United Way.

However, government advocacy by nonprofits remained an uncommon practice.

Restrictions and [regulations were frequently shifting](#) over the issue of tax-exempt organizations influencing the government. As expectations became more defined over time, 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations became able to engage in non-partisan issue advocacy without risk to their tax-exempt status. The result has been a broad segment of charitable organizations engaging in government advocacy.

What are the limits to nonprofit advocacy?

While advocacy is a common activity for nonprofits to engage in, there are limitations that must be followed to avoid legal challenges. For example, 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations are not allowed to engage in "political activity": supporting or opposing an individual candidate or political party seeking an election to public office, including state, local and federal elections. The limitation also extends to employees and volunteers engaging in political activity while acting as representatives of the organization. Violating this can lead an organization to lose

its tax-exempt status. [Only 501\(c\)\(4\), \(5\) and \(6\) organizations](#) are allowed to engage in this political activity without consequence, as long as it is not their primary function.

Lobbying is another route a nonprofit organization can take in government advocacy. It involves attempting to influence specific legislation through direct communication with members of a government body. A charitable organization that intends to lobby must file an “[H Election](#)” and report all financial resources used in lobbying on their Form 990, since the IRS places spending limits on these activities for nonprofits.

Image by Lillian Finley

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