

American Association of Museums

ADVOCACY FOR MUSEUMS

Museum Advocacy in an Election Year

Between staggered congressional elections, special elections and presidential elections, it seems that every year is an election year. In this climate of increased scrutiny and public accountability, museum professionals need to be aware of how involved they can and cannot get in local, state and federal elections. To help museums comply with [IRS guidelines](#), AAM has resources to share with nonprofit museums regarding their 501(c)(3) status and election-year advocacy activities.

As stated in "[Nonprofits and Government: What You Can and Can't Do](#)," the basic rules are:

- **Advocacy is fine.** You can talk to your elected local, state and federal officials, and to career civil servants as much as you want about anything related to your museum. (There are some theoretical limits on what you can spend to do so, but you very likely won't cross them.)
- **Election involvement is not.** You cannot, in your official capacity as an employee of a 501(c)(3), take a position for or against a candidate for political office, whether at the local, state or federal level. In addition, your museum may not take such a stand. The principle to bear in mind here is evenhandedness.
- **For a thoughtful discussion** of appropriate election-year advocacy, including facilities rentals issues, see "[Appropriate Advocacy, Clear and Simple](#)" (*Museum News* May/June 2004).
- **Review** the extensive [nonprofit advocacy](#) and [election resources](#) available on the [Independent Sector](#) website, including [IRS Guidance on Political Activity of 501\(c\)\(3\) Organizations](#), [Lobbying Rules for 501\(c\)\(3\)s](#) and [IRS Oversight of Charities and Foundations](#).
- **Visit [Tax Talk Today](#)** to create a free registration and access their entire archive of programming, transcripts and webcast materials, including "[Political Intervention: Do's and Don'ts for 501\(c\) \(3\) Organizations](#)."

For information about candidates, campaigns and elections in your state or community, visit:

- Ballot Initiatives Strategy Center: www.ballot.org
- Congress.org: www.congress.org
- Open Secrets: www.opensecrets.org
- Vote Smart: www.vote-smart.org



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