

Advocacy Activities for 501(c)(3) Public Charities

“[Advocacy](#)” encompasses a broad range of activities that can influence public policy - including research, public education, lobbying, and voter education. This factsheet will help 501(c)(3) public charities understand the kinds of advocacy activities in which they can safely engage.

It’s important to remember that public charities can lobby within generous limits, but are prohibited from supporting or opposing candidates for public office. For more information, check out [Public Charities Can Lobby](#) and [Election Checklist for 501c3 Public Charities: Ensuring Election Year Advocacy Efforts Remain Nonpartisan](#).

Foundations often give “lobbying-restricted funds,” meaning they place restrictions in grant agreements that prohibit their grantees from using those grant funds for lobbying. Such restrictions are not legally required in a grant to a public charity. But, once included in a grant agreement, the grantee is contractually obligated to adhere to the restriction.

The following table sets out common advocacy activities for 501(c)(3) public charities and notes those in which your organization can safely engage using “lobbying-restricted funds”.

<u>Activity</u>	<u>501(c)(3) Public Charity</u>	<u>501(c)(3) Public Charity Using Lobbying-Restricted Funds</u>
Meet with legislators to express a view about specific legislation.	Limited ¹	X
Support/oppose ballot measures	Limited	X
Design an ad urging the public to contact their legislators about a piece of legislation	Limited	X
Draft a sign-on letter to send to legislators that expresses a view about specific legislation	Limited	X
Lobby Day at the capital	Limited	X
Organize an event asking the public to contact their legislators to support a bill	Limited	X
Coordinate volunteers to go door-to-door to urge their neighbors to support a ballot measure	Limited	X
Write talking points for volunteers to use when calling legislators to oppose legislation	Limited	X
Send an email encouraging the general public to contact their legislators about an executive nominee requiring Senate confirmation	Limited	X

¹ Lobbying expenditures include travel costs, staff time during the meetings, to prepare for meetings and materials prepared for meetings. For more information, see [When Does Your Activity Become Lobbying?](#)

Advocacy Day at the capital to raise awareness of an issue	✓	✓
Criticize sitting elected officials' position on an issue	✓ (may not attack their personal characteristics or attack them in their status as a candidate)	✓ (may not attack their personal characteristics or attack them in their status as a candidate)
Write talking points about the importance of an issue	✓	✓
Meet with executive branch officials to recommend an executive order	✓	✓
Research an issue and write a report	✓	✓
Write and submit comments to a regulatory agency	✓	✓
Meet with legislators to educate them on an issue of concern to your organization	✓	✓
Organize a rally to demand a particular action from the governor	✓	✓
Organize a rally that urges people to call their senators to support a bill	Limited	✗
Litigate	✓	✓
Draft a petition to urge the governor to prioritize an issue of concern to your organization	✓	✓
Circulate a petition to Congress urging opposition to a Supreme Court nominee	Limited	✗
Invite legislators to visit your facility	✓	✓
Organize an education conference to share information and network with allied organizations and advocates	✓	✓
Write an op-ed or letter to the editor about your concern for a particular bill (without asking the general public to call their legislators to support/oppose a bill)	✓	✓
Educate the public on priority issues for your organization	✓	✓
Organize a convening to discuss an issue with allied organizations	✓	✓
Distribute a legislative scorecard	✓	✓
Conduct nonpartisan get-out-the-vote and voter registration drives ²	✓	✓

² Voter registration rules vary from state to state; [please check your state's rules](#) before conducting a nonpartisan voter registration drive.

Conduct voter registration and GOTV activities based on party affiliation or how people will vote	✘	✘
Conduct public education and training sessions about participation in the political process	✔	✔
Educate candidates on issues within the purview of the organization	✔ (must offer information to all candidates)	✔ (must offer information to all candidates)
Endorse candidates and publicize its endorsements	✘	✘
Sponsor a debate between candidates, where all viable candidates are invited and given equal opportunity to speak on a broad range of issues	✔	✔
Distribute voter guides to the public that set out the candidates' views on a board range of issues	✔	✔
Compare organization's issue position with that of a candidate	✘	✘
Ask candidates to sign pledges on any issue	✘	✘
Rent mailing lists and facilities at fair market value to other organizations, legislators, and candidates	✔ (if rent, must allow any candidates to rent)	✔ (if rent, must allow any candidates to rent)
Conduct nonpartisan voter protection activities	✔	✔

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