



FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT®  
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FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

## YMCA ADVOCACY: CAMPAIGN AND ELECTION DOS AND DON'TS

The federal government sets clear and generous rules to allow not-for-profits to engage in advocacy and lobbying. IRS Code does, however, strictly prohibit “participating or intervening in any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.” YMCAs should also avoid the perception of partisan political activity. Here are a few dos and don'ts regarding political involvement for 501(c)(3) organizations:

### Contact:

Government Relations and  
Policy Office  
YMCA of the USA

Connect with a moderator in  
the [Advocacy community](#) on  
Link.

### DO

- Remember that you're a private citizen! YMCA staff and volunteers can participate in elections (donate money, volunteer, etc.), provided anything they say or do is as a private citizen and not as a YMCA representative (or taking place at YMCA property)
- Conduct nonpartisan candidate forums to educate voters on candidates and promote civic engagement
- Extend invitations to all candidates to tour your YMCA and learn more about your mission, community impact and program and services
- Inform candidates and voters of your YMCA's positions on issues related to your mission
- Register voters and encourage voting (impartially)
- Offer your facility as a polling location on election day
- Advocate for legislation, policies or regulations that further your mission, during election time and any other time

### DON'T

- Participate, endorse, work for or intervene in any campaign (federal, state or local) for or against any political candidate
- Oppose any candidates or political campaigns
- Sponsor a political action committee (PAC)
- Give money, in-kind or any other contributions to candidates, parties or political action committees
- Use federal funds for any political or lobbying purposes
- Mobilize supporters to elect or defeat candidates
- Collect and/or distribute candidates' statements, questionnaires, voting records, or sell membership lists to candidates (while legal within specific parameters, it is recommended YMCAs avoid this)

### YMCA OF THE USA

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## Hosting Candidates

While it sounds straightforward to avoid endorsing or opposing a candidate for elected office, questions do arise when it comes to hosting candidates. As community leaders and conveners, YMCAs often have candidates (local, state and federal) for public office in our buildings. Sometimes it's the Y issuing the invitation for a public forum and sometimes it's a candidate asking to come to the Y. Whether a person is campaigning for the school board, the state house, or even the presidency, it's just as important to meet the letter of the law as it is to meet the spirit and avoid the perception of partisanship.

The IRS requires that you don't:

- Play favorites – if you invite one candidate, invite everyone running for that office (they don't all have to attend). If you rent space to one candidate, allow others.
- Allow use of office services that could be construed as an in-kind contribution.
- Imply endorsement through introductions, t-shirts, buttons, signage, web sites, etc.
- Waive any "customary and usual" room rental rates.

Y-USA also recommends that you consider:

- Any programs or services that may be displaced.
- If you're renting a space with significant Y signage (like a gym) the Y logo may appear in photos or media reports. Also, the Y will be listed as the location in communications.
- If political fundraising will take place. It's allowed with rental space but not when the organization invites the candidate for voter education.

The IRS has published a Frequently Asked Questions about the Ban on Political Campaign Intervention by 501(c)(3) organizations:

[https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-tege/501c3\\_polcampfaqs.pdf](https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-tege/501c3_polcampfaqs.pdf)

## Specific Issues/Ballot Initiatives/Referendums

Legally, public charities can take a stand on local ballot initiatives. Examples may include supporting a smoking ban or a bond for the public schools. A few questions to consider:

- Does this advance the mission of the Y? Often, the Y's endorsement carries great weight in a community. It's okay to remain neutral.
- Is there a perception that this is partisan? If the issue is divisive in the community, take great caution before aligning the Y with one side over another.
- What do your CVO and board think? Always consult your board to discuss options and prepare to defend your position in the media and with members.

Please contact Y-USA's Government Relations and Public Policy Office to discuss any specific circumstances.