

Advocacy vs. Lobbying for Arts Nonprofits

What 501(c)(3) arts organizations can safely say and do

The Big Picture

Arts organizations do not lose their tax-exempt status for speaking out on issues. A 501(c)(3) is at risk only if it participates or intervenes in a political campaign, or if it exceeds limits on lobbying, meaning attempts to influence specific legislation. Everything else lives in a wide, workable middle regulated by the Internal Revenue Service.

Advocacy (Allowed and Encouraged)

Advocacy is educating, informing, and speaking about issues, values, and impact. For arts organizations, this includes describing how public policy affects artists, audiences, creative workers, cultural spaces, and local economies. Advocacy includes issue education; values-based statements; storytelling and research; economic and community impact data; artistic expression and programming; and general statements such as “We support public investment in the arts.” Advocacy is not limited.

What Is Never Allowed

Arts nonprofits may never endorse or oppose candidates, coordinate with political campaigns, or use organizational resources to influence elections. There are no exceptions.

Lobbying (Limited, but Legal)

Lobbying means attempting to influence specific legislation. This includes supporting or opposing a specific bill, asking legislators to vote a certain way, or urging the public to contact legislators about a bill. Lobbying is allowed, but it cannot become a substantial part of an arts nonprofit’s overall activities.

How Much Lobbying Is Safe?

A widely accepted best practice is to keep lobbying under ten percent of an organization’s overall activities. Staying under this threshold is commonly understood as not substantial. Issue education, storytelling, public programming, and values-based communications do not count as lobbying.

What Arts Organizations Can Safely Do

Arts nonprofits may speak openly about values, impact, and harm. This includes naming how national or state actions affect immigrant artists, creative workers, audiences, funding, cultural access, and community wellbeing, and reaffirming commitments to creativity, belonging, free expression, and public access to the arts.

Language That Keeps You Safe

Use: “We are concerned about...” • “This impacts our arts community by...” • “Our mission compels us to...” • “We support policies that strengthen the arts.”

Avoid: Naming political parties or candidates • “Vote them out / Keep them in” • Campaign-style messaging.

Bottom Line

Arts organizations are allowed and expected to speak up during moments of uncertainty. You can be values-driven, honest, and responsive without risking your status by avoiding partisanship and keeping lobbying limited.