

Guidelines for Participation in Campaign Activities and Ballot Measures

Overview

As a public university in the State of Michigan and a tax-exempt organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, Michigan State University is subject to a number of legal constraints, which limit its ability to engage in partisan political activities involving campaigns for public office and ballot measures. The purpose of this website is to provide basic information on these constraints and guidelines for members of the University community regarding their participation in such activities.

Engaging in Campaign Activity

The University encourages all University community members to vote and to become involved in the political process, provided that they keep their partisan political activities separate from their work at MSU. Individuals using personal time and resources—not public funds—have great latitude to engage in campaign activities.

Section 57 of the Michigan Campaign Finance Act (MCFA) prohibits a public body like MSU or an individual acting for a public body like MSU from using public resources to assist, oppose, or influence the nomination or election of a candidate for public office or the qualification, passage, or defeat of a ballot question.

Examples of faculty, staff, and student activities that are generally *not* permitted:

- Using University offices or other facilities, computers, photocopiers, telephones, or other property or equipment (for example, vehicles) to engage in advocacy for or against, or fundraising for, a candidate for public office or a ballot question.
- Using University letterhead, logos, or trademarks, or a University email address when engaging in private partisan political activities on behalf of, or in opposition to, a candidate for public office or a ballot question.
- Using University funds for tickets for, or to pay the cost of attending, any meal, rally, testimonial, or other fund-raising event whose purpose is to support or oppose a candidate for public office or to support or oppose a ballot question.

The MCFA includes several exceptions that allow for limited use of public resources related to campaign activity.

Activities that may be permitted under the MCFA include:

- The expression of views on a ballot initiative or campaign by an elected or appointed public official who has policy-making responsibilities, like the President of the University or a member of the Board of Trustees.
- The dissemination of factual information concerning issues relevant to the University's function or mission. University funds and resources can be used to create this factual information.
- The production and dissemination of information, debates, interviews, commentary, and interviews about campaigns by University-affiliated media like WKAR, as long as it occurs in the regular course of their broadcasting or publishing activities.
- The use of University facilities by any candidate for public office or any advocate for or against a ballot question if the opposing candidate or advocate has an equivalent opportunity to use the facility. Both sides have to be given equal access to the facility.
- Political activities at the apartments of individuals who reside in University-owned housing, as long as the apartment is not used for a political fund-raising event.

The MCFA does not affect the right of any University employee to participate in the political process as long as the employee is acting and speaking on his/her own behalf, and not on behalf of the University, and is using personal time, funds, and resources.

Similarly, federal tax law regulates the participation in the electoral process of charitable and educational organizations described in Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. MSU is such an organization. To receive the benefits of tax-exempt status that derive from qualifying as a 501(c)(3) organization under the Internal Revenue Code, an organization cannot participate or intervene in any political campaign on behalf of, or in opposition to, any candidate for public office. Therefore, 501(c)(3) organizations may not endorse candidates, make statements in support or opposition of candidates, raise funds for or donate to candidates, or become involved in any activities that support or oppose any candidate. The political campaign activity prohibition is not intended to restrict free expression on political matters by leaders of organizations speaking for themselves, as individuals. Nor are leaders prohibited from speaking about important issues of public policy.

Nonetheless, University employees should be aware of the possibility that individuals who are not part of the University community will assume that they are speaking for the University when they identify themselves as University faculty or administrators in a non-work-related communication. It is especially important to be cautious about using University titles when the non-work-related communication involves partisan political activities. When a reference to a University title or position cannot be avoided in a non-work-related communication (as when the title is used by the media), employees should clearly indicate that their comments or views are personal in nature and, if possible, that the University title is used for identification purposes only.

For answers to frequently asked questions regarding participation in campaign activity, please visit the FAQ section. If you have specific questions regarding campaign activity, please contact MSU Government Relations at 517-353-9000 or at govrel@msu.edu.

For information and questions regarding speech under the First Amendment, visit: <https://msu.edu/freespeech/faq>.

FAQs

General FAQs:

1. What is a political event or campaign activity?

Political events or campaign activities include but are not limited to events advocating for or against a candidate, political party, or ballot proposal; or soliciting campaign contributions.

If you have questions regarding whether your anticipated event or activity would be considered a political event, please contact, MSU Government Relations at 517-353-9000 or at govrel@msu.edu. If you are affiliated with an MSU Registered Student Organization (RSO) please contact the MSU Office of Spartan Experiences at 517-355-8286 or at stulife@msu.edu.

2. What are University funds or resources?

Michigan law broadly defines public resources and includes funds, office space or other facilities, computer hardware or software, stationary, postage, vehicles, supplies, or personnel. This also includes a University Zoom or Microsoft Teams account.

3. Are educational conferences discussing campaign issues or ballot proposals permitted?

Generally, yes. If the conference is solely educational, use of University resources may be permitted.

If the conference involves advocating for or against a ballot proposal or candidate, you must follow University policies and procedures for use of University facilities.

FAQs for Non-MSU Groups

1. I am a candidate for office, affiliated with a political party, affiliated with a ballot proposal, or otherwise involved in campaign activities. Can I host an event on campus?

Yes. You must reserve space and you may be required to pay a facility reservation fee. Political candidates or organizations may have access to facilities normally available to the public for purposes of political events. However, fundraising activities for candidates or ballot proposals are not permitted on campus.

2. How do I reserve a space for my event?

Please submit requests to reserve space to MSU Conference Services at 517-353-9300 or at conferences@rhs.msu.edu.

FAQs for Employees

1. As a University employee, are there restrictions on my participation in political activities?

Yes. University employees may not use University resources to engage in political activities. This includes but is not limited to use of University telephones, email accounts, offices, Zoom/Teams accounts, mailing supplies, or an employee's official time for such activities.

2. Can I engage in political activities during my personal time?

Yes. The MCFA does not affect the right of any University employee to participate in the political process as long as the employee is acting and speaking on their own behalf, and not on behalf of the University, and is using personal time, funds, and resources.

3. As a University employee, can I run for public office?

Yes. University employees may run for public office, and campaign activities must be conducted on an employee's personal time. Use of University resources for campaign activities is not permitted.

- Faculty/Academic Staff: For the period of such candidacy, faculty and academic staff must obtain a leave of absence or continue to work at the University on a part-time basis. Please consult the [Faculty Handbook Section on Participation in Partisan Political Activities](#) for additional information.
- Senior Administrators: Senior administrators should refer to Section IV(C) of the [Standards of Official Conduct for Senior University Administrators](#).

4. Can I use my University title when engaging in campaign or political activities on my personal time?

University employees should be aware of the possibility that individuals who are not part of the University community will assume that they are speaking for the University when they identify themselves as University faculty or administrators in a non-work-related communication. It is especially important to be cautious about using University titles when the non-work-related communication involves partisan political activities. When a reference to a University title or position cannot be avoided in a non-work-related communication (as when the title is used by the media), employees should clearly indicate that their comments or views are personal in nature and, if possible, that the University title is used for identification purposes only.

5. Can I teach a course covering campaign and political activity?

University faculty teaching courses such as political science or providing a course of instruction that includes student involvement in campaign activities without specifying the candidates or ballot measures on whose behalf the students should campaign and where is permitted; for example, students writing papers or making class presentations evaluating their experiences.

6. Can I conduct research pertaining to political activity?

Yes. University members are permitted to engage in academic research related to past or current political campaigns or the issues that underlie them. Additionally, researchers

may disseminate the results of that research in a manner consistent with normal academic practice.

7. Can I invite a candidate to campus or a speaker who is involved in political activity?

Likely yes, but please contact MSU Government Relations at 517-353-9000 or at govrel@msu.edu, before hosting an event or reserving space to ensure you follow applicable policies and procedures.

8. Can the University engage in any political activities?

The University may engage in nonpartisan educational activities related to ballot measures or political campaigns by candidates for public office. Examples of such activities include candidate forums to which all candidates are invited; symposia on ballot measures in which proponents and opponents of the ballot measure have an equal opportunity to participate; and the distribution of voter guides and voter education materials such as those provided through MSU Extension, provided the guides and materials comply with IRS guidelines. Voter education materials prepared by candidates, political parties, and PACs may be distributed only if distribution is evenhanded and on a nonpartisan basis – for example, an area in a student gathering place where all candidates and parties may make campaign materials available to students. IRS guidelines for voter guides and educational materials require generally that all candidates be afforded an equal opportunity to comment; that questions be asked on a neutral basis; that, while length may be limited, candidate answers cannot be edited or summarized; and that candidate responses be presented in a neutral manner.

For example, [MSUvote](#) is a non-partisan campus committee whose mission it is to increase the number of registered student voters, to inform and educate students on candidates and issues, and to bolster student participation on Election Day.

FAQs for Students and Registered Student Organizations (RSO):

1. Can my RSO invite a speaker who is a political candidate or will otherwise be discussing campaign activities or ballot proposals?

Yes. Opportunities for candidates to speak on campus and to use campus facilities for campaign advertising must be offered and granted equally. RSOs must follow applicable [Student Group Regulations related to funding student-sponsored programs](#) and must adhere to the [University Facilities-Use for Political Activities Policy](#).

Students and RSOs can also review the [Office of Spartan Experiences' Guidelines](#).

For additional information about outside speakers, please refer to the University [Speakers on Campus Policy](#).

2. What facilities can be reserved for political events?

Political and public organizations may have access to facilities normally available to the public (i.e. Kellogg Center, MSU Union, Breslin Center). The space must be reserved in accordance with University policy and procedures.

3. How can I obtain approval for use of University facilities for campaign activities?

RSOs sponsoring a candidate or political activity must submit a request to reserve space to the MSU Office of Spartan Experiences at 517-355-8286 or at stulife@msu.edu. All other groups must request the use of University facilities through [MSU Conference Services at 517-353-9300 or at \[conferences@rhs.msu.edu\]\(mailto:conferences@rhs.msu.edu\)](#). This applies to all MSU facilities, not just those on the East Lansing campus.

4. Are students or RSOs required to pay fees for hosting candidates or events associated with campaign activities?

RSOs may host candidates or campaign events, but the candidate or campaign is required to pay the facility reservation rate; they are not permitted to pay the RSO or student rate.

5. Who should RSOs contact to determine whether an anticipated event is permissible?

The MSU Office of Spartan Experiences at 517-355-8286 or at stulife@msu.edu.

Relevant Law

- [Michigan Campaign Finance Act](#)
- Internal Revenue Code: [Title 26 of the United States Code](#)
 - For additional information, see [IRS Fact Sheets](#)

Additional Resources

1. [University Facilities-Use for Political Activities Policy](#)
2. MSU Faculty Handbook: [Participation in Partisan Politics](#)
3. [MSU Regulations: Campaigning, Canvassing, and Petition Drives](#)
4. [Guidelines Re: Political Campaign Advertising](#)