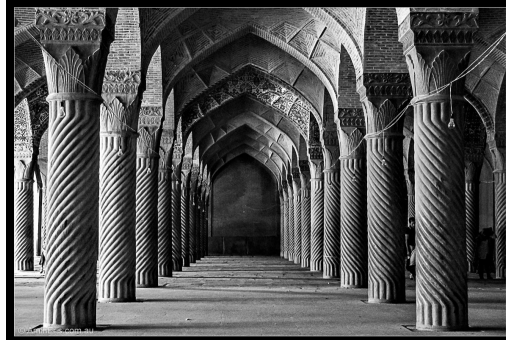




Politicians in a Mosque?

The Legal Rules for Civic Engagement



During his time, our beloved Prophet Muhammad, ﷺ, served the community in a number of capacities—as a prophet, counselor, father, and military leader—as well as a statesman. He forged treaties and alliances, and commissioned envoys. He counseled political leaders of other kingdoms, and encouraged civic engagement of those around him, both men and women, the rich and the poor. In our own time, the overwhelming majority of American Islamic scholars have supported contemporary equivalents, like voting and legislative advocacy, if not stating these actions to be closer to that of religious obligations than merely extra *hasanaat*.

The American political system provides a number of opportunities for citizens (and non-citizens) to get involved in a variety of ways that can influence local, state, and federal policies. Participating in local and federal elections on an annual basis (both primaries and general elections) and voter registration drives are important. However, there are additional opportunities where influence can also be exerted. As a general rule, there are two primary ways to build power in order to influence political outcomes—organized money and organized people. This document highlights the latter method.

At the local level, city/county board and commission meetings are important gatherings to attend, and Muslims should seek appointments to public office. Legislative advocacy is also an essential activity for influencing policies that are passed by local, state, and federally elected leaders.

The following guidelines provide a snapshot for mosques, Islamic schools, and Muslim community centers/organizations (**that are registered as 501c3 organizations**) for how they can safely and legally participate in the political process:

- **You can “lobby” elected officials in your own space or their office**

Generally referred to as “advocacy”, you can ask for meetings with elected officials on any issue you want, for any reason. This is permissible as long as advocacy does *not* constitute a “substantial amount” of your organization’s total activities (time and budget). The IRS has never clarified what a “substantial amount” means, but many legal professionals say that dedicating less than 10% of an organization’s activities and resources toward policy advocacy is a safe benchmark to follow.

- **You can encourage voting, discuss the importance of voting in elections, and openly support or oppose issues of your choosing**

You *cannot* explicitly endorse candidates or political parties. Additionally, fundraising for or against any candidate or party cannot take place on your property or in your official non-profit capacity. However, you can educate the community by holding forums, posting signs, and sending electronic communications in a non-partisan manner about issues of your choosing, even if it is an issue that divides candidates. This is perfectly legal.

- **Your space can become a polling place &/or voter registration area**

If you have sufficient space and are ADA compliant, contact your local board of elections to become a polling place. Voter registration in your own space is allowed if you work in partnership with non-partisan, non-profit groups, or run your own non-partisan voter operation.

- **You can create voting scorecards on candidates & elected officials**

Again, you *cannot* tell people HOW to vote. Organization leaders cannot make partisan comments in official organization publications or at official functions. When speaking in a non-official capacity, organizational leaders should clearly indicate that their comments are personal, and not intended to represent the views of the organization. However, you can give your community information related to issues you deem important, e.g. by summarizing their voting records or public statements on these issues and why you support or oppose those issues.

- **You can invite elected officials and candidates to speak**

If there is an election, ensure you invite all candidates to events or forums you hold. You can be more selective with elected officials who *already hold office* and thus you do NOT need to invite *all* elected officials. This is a good way to demonstrate voter power/interest to candidates and elected officials and increase your influence.

*The information above has been drawn from a variety of legal sources, compiled by ISNA’s Office for Interfaith & Community Alliances, and endorsed by the following organizations. Please contact a legal professional or refer to the IRS for more info:

<https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p4221pc.pdf>

