



This new department highlights the work of the National Council of Nonprofit Associations and state associations, which help nonprofits – like your organization – manage and lead more effectively, collaborate and exchange solutions, save money, engage in critical policy issues, and achieve greater impact. This department will feature tools and tips on every aspect of management and governance and help you think about how your nonprofit can get more engaged in public policy and advocacy.



# Our American Democracy: How Do Nonprofits Fit In?

Why should nonprofits care about public policy and engage in advocacy? This historical view provides a clear answer.

By Erica Greeley

Our American democracy is founded on the freedoms of speech and association. Nonprofit organizations represent the primary vehicle for these freedoms and for the realization of any democracy that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” If this claim sounds overblown, it is not. Theory, history, and practice have shown that a vibrant, independent, nonprofit sector is critical to democracy. As such, nonprofits have an obligation to represent their constituents’ needs to the government, media, and public at large.

Let’s look first at theory. When the founding fathers were debating the role of federal government during the Constitutional Convention of 1787, they argued that the diversity of “factions” across the nation would keep the federal government from oppressing its people.<sup>1</sup> According to their theory, the prevalence of such diverse interest groups ensured that citizens would debate one another in a healthy, democratic way. Theoretically, like-minded individuals would associate with one another and speak out about their needs and opinions. Nonprofit organizations were the best vehicle for such association and expression.

History supports this theory. Alexis de Tocqueville, a French statesman, visited the United States

in the mid-1800s and observed that the American democracy’s success was due to “associations of a thousand kinds.”<sup>2</sup> The grand tradition of associations continued to show its strength a century later during the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, as nonprofits led the charge for civil rights, gender equity, peace, environmental

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protection, and other important issues. In 1975 the Filer Commission, convened by the U.S. Senate, issued a report defining the nonprofit sector’s nine roles. Seven of these roles relate directly to policy, advocacy, and democracy. These roles include initiating new ideas and processes, developing public policy, supporting minority or local interests, and overseeing government and the marketplace.

In practice, nonprofits engage in a myriad of activities that promote democracy. For example, they provide opportunities for civic engagement and volunteerism, nonpartisan voter education and mobilization, public education, advocacy, and lobbying. (Of course there are

some restrictions to nonprofit lobbying; please see [www.cpli.org](http://www.cpli.org) for more information.) Recently, nonprofits have moved away from these activities in favor of providing services because of (1) government’s outsourcing of social services, (2) economic downturns that increased needs in local communities, and (3) the trend toward outcome measurement and evaluation. But nonprofits’ historical role as advocates remains critical to society at large.

This issue of *Nonprofit World* provides a variety of perspectives on advocacy work. We hope that these articles inspire you to learn more about what you can do as a nonprofit leader, advocate, or volunteer to ensure that the people you serve and the issues you care about are represented in the halls of public debate. ■

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Madison, James, *The Federalist Papers*, No. 10, 1787.

<sup>2</sup>De Tocqueville, Alexis, *Of the Use Which Americans Make of Public Associations and Civic Life*, 1840.

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