



A Citizen's Guide to Advocacy: Supporting and Strengthening the United Nations

What can a 501(c)3 nonpartisan organization do? What can an individual do?

In a democracy, citizens not only have the right, but the responsibility to let their elected officials know their views on public policy issues.

It is legal for individuals and non-profit organizations to lobby.

To be effective advocates for the United Nations (UN), we must express our support for the UN to policymakers and must educate the general public to join us. Also, we must deliver our message in the most effective manner possible.

Because so very many civil society groups have programs and missions that were developed with the United Nations system, we have opportunities to involve new partners to help educate and advocate for the UN.

We live in a time of possibilities. While there are some limitations on how much a 501(c)3 organization, such as a UNA Chapter, can spend on lobbying, it is entirely legal for chapters to lobby Congress on the UNA Advocacy agenda.

More importantly, there is NO limitation on lobbying by individual citizens and constituents. It is a First Amendment right and one of the privileges and responsibilities of living in a democracy to be able to exercise the right to meet with or otherwise contact politicians, tell them how we want them to vote and then let them know on election-day if we thought they did a good job.

What can non-profit organizations do legally?

It is important to remember that any non-profit organization is permitted to lobby and that it will never jeopardize its 501(c)3 tax status as long as it abides by the IRS regulations. Here are some helpful facts about lobbying:

Lobbying is defined by the IRS as expenditure of an organization's resources to promote particular legislation. This does not include supporting the UN without mentioning specific legislation, such as by referring to a bill number.

Direct lobbying is when money is spent for communication to a legislator or government employee who may participate in the formulation of the legislation and: (a) refers to the legislation and (b) expresses a view on the legislation.

Grassroots lobbying is an attempt to influence specific legislation by encouraging the public to contact legislators about that legislation. Such grassroots lobbying: (a) refers to specific legislation, (b) reflects a view about the legislation, and (c) encourages people to communicate with Members of Congress about that legislation.



If a UNA-USA chapter doesn't spend funds or use UNA resources for these purposes, then according to the IRS, it has not lobbied. IRS lobbying laws do not limit the educating of legislators. Organizations can inform their individual members about the legislative process and how citizens can influence the process. **Lobbying simply refers to the allocation of an organization's funds and other resources for the purpose of influencing specific legislation.**

A 501(c)(3) organization can spend an “insubstantial” amount (usually interpreted as 5%) of its overall activities on lobbying or an organization can opt to spend up to 20% of its budget by filing IRS Form 5768 and electing to come under the provisions of section 501(h) of the Internal Revenue Code. Education and research expenditures are not reported as lobbying. The Better World Fund [BWF] has opted to spend up to 20%. Therefore UNA chapters that are part of the BWF group tax exemption are also permitted to spend at that level. Much of what chapters do, including direct lobbying, is at no cost, so is not counted within this limit.

In addition to educating and lobbying Congress, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization can educate its individual members, contributors and supporters about the issues and the importance of educating and lobbying Congress. Members of Congress are usually more impressed by an informed constituency (voters) who regularly visit their district offices than by lobbyists in Washington, D.C. They are impressed if they have both visits from paid lobbyists in D.C. where they and their legislative assistants are kept well informed AND by constituents back home who demonstrate that citizens care about strengthening and supporting economic development, peace and security, human rights, climate change and the full UN agenda.

501(c)(3) non-profit organizations CANNOT endorse, support or oppose political candidates.

What can one person do?

As an individual without indicating UNA affiliation, s/he can lobby for or against specific legislation, urge passage or defeat of a bill and try to directly influence the laws that govern our lives. An individual constituent can call, write and visit Members of Congress. Also, Congresspeople are regularly in their state or district offices and UNA members can visit with them there as well. Members of Congress are usually more impressed by informed district constituents (voters) who regularly visit their district offices than by lobbyists in Washington, D.C.

The key to being an effective citizen advocate is to develop an on-going relationship with your Congressperson's staff, provide reliable information to the staff and understand the basics of the legislative process. Bringing individuals who can speak to various aspects of UN value to the U.S. and other countries is particularly good.

As a UN supporter, you can promote specific legislation while informing elected officials about how the UN benefits the United States overall. You can find out from UNA-USA or through your own research your officials' party affiliations, past voting records (if any), and their committee assignments. You can research how many others in the Congressional district support the UN's mission and funding for the UN and, if possible, invite others to represent a diverse group of constituents and demonstrate the breadth of support.

Given that your Congressperson has to deal with every issue facing the country, s/he will often turn to staff to know the latest, best information about the U.S.-UN relationship. But these staff also cover multiple issues. By volunteering to be a reliable advocate for information you can be one of several persons who become a strong asset for your Congressperson when they need information on the United Nations.

Individuals CAN endorse, support and raise money for political candidates up to certain dollar limits.