POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

Political Activities

For the complete text of the currently applicable version of this policy, see Administrative Guide Memo 1.5.1 Political Activities (https://adminguide.stanford.edu/chapter-1/subchapter-5/policy-1-5-1).

Summary

The following summarizes the policy on Political Activities:

Stanford University, as a charitable entity, is subject to federal, state, and local laws and regulations regarding political activities: campaign activities, lobbying, and the giving of gifts to public officials.

While all members of the University community are naturally free to express their political opinions and engage in political activities to whatever extent they wish, it is very important that they do so only in their individual capacities and avoid even the appearance that they are speaking or acting for the University in political matters.

In the limited circumstances where individuals must speak or act on behalf of the University in the political arena, they must do so in accordance with the provisions of this Guide Memo.

Policy

The following is quoted from the policy:

1. Summary of Legal Requirements and Restrictions

   a. Campaign Activities: contributions of money, goods, or services to candidates for political office and in support of or opposition to ballot measure campaigns are subject to a wide variety of political laws. Depending on the jurisdiction and the campaign, political contributions may be prohibited or limited and, in nearly all cases, are subject to a complicated series of disclosure rules. Because of the University’s tax-exempt status, the University is legally prohibited from endorsing candidates for political office or making any contribution of money, goods, or services to candidates. It is important, therefore, that no person inadvertently cause the University to make such a contribution.

   b. Lobbying: lobbying can generally be described as any attempt to influence the action of any legislative body (for example, Congress, state legislatures, county boards, city councils, and their staffs) or any federal, state, or local government agency. Laws regulating lobbying exist at the federal, state, and local levels but can differ widely in scope, depending on the jurisdiction. Some laws, for example, only regulate lobbying of the legislative branch. Others, however, also cover lobbying of administrative agencies and officers in the executive branch (for example, lobbying for federally-funded grants). To one degree or another, however, most lobbying laws require registration and reporting by individuals engaged in attempts to influence governmental action. Tax-exempt organizations are permitted to lobby, and the University engages in lobbying on a limited number of issues, mostly those affecting education, research, and related activities. There is usually some threshold of time or money spent on lobbying that triggers registration and reporting requirements. Regardless of thresholds, however, no University employee other than the following individuals, on matters under their jurisdiction, may lobby on behalf of the University without specific authorization:

      • President
      • Provost
      • Deans of the Seven Schools
      • Vice Provost and Dean of Research
      • Vice President for Business Affairs and Chief Financial Officer
      • Executive Director of Human Resources
      • Director of the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center
      • Director of the Hoover Institution
      • General Counsel
      • Vice President for Public Affairs

   The Vice Provost and Dean of Research may grant permission to faculty members to lobby on behalf of the University for specific purposes. The Director of Government and Community Relations may grant permission to staff members to lobby on behalf of the University for specific purposes. All lobbying on behalf of the University should be coordinated with the Director of Government and Community Relations.

   c. Giving of Gifts to Public Officials and Staff: almost all jurisdictions have strict rules on the extent to which gifts and honoraria may be given to public officials (both elected and non-elected officials and, often, staff). In some cases gifts and honoraria are prohibited; in others they are limited; and in most cases they are subject to detailed disclosure. In addition, in some jurisdictions such as California, gifts to both state and local public officials can result in a public official’s disqualification from participation in any governmental action affecting the interests of the donor. Meals, travel, and entertainment are the most common types of gifts, but gift rules can also apply in cases where public officials attend a reception or receive tickets to sporting or other events.

   As a non-profit organization, the University generally does not give gifts to public officials and, in those limited cases where it does give such gifts, it must do so in accordance with all applicable laws and regulations. Therefore, any University employee who, on behalf of the University, wishes to make a gift to a public official must receive prior approval from the Director of Government and Community Relations before making such a gift.

   d. Reporting of Political Activities: the University must report most of its political activities above certain thresholds. Therefore, any University employee engaging in such activities on behalf of the University should carefully review the remainder of this Guide Memo and should consult the Director of Government and Community Relations before engaging in any activity.

2. Prohibited and Restricted Political Activities

   a. In General:

      i. No person may, on behalf of the University, engage in any political activity in support of or opposition to any candidate for elective public office (including giving or receiving funds or endorsements), nor shall any University resources be used for such purpose.

      ii. No person may, on behalf of the University, lobby (or use University resources to lobby) any federal, state, or local legislative or administrative official or staff member unless specifically authorized to do so. Any lobbying activity, even
3. Permissible Activities

a. In General: as noted above, the federal, state, and local laws which limit the partisan political activities that can take place in University facilities and with University support in no way inhibit the expression of personal political views by any individual in the University community. Nor do they forbid faculty, students, or staff from joining with others in support of candidates for office or in furtherance of political causes. There is no restriction on discussion of political issues or teaching of political techniques.

b. Limited University Political Activities: limited activities relating to specific federal, state, or local legislation or ballot initiatives are permissible where (1) the subject matter is directly related to core interests of the University’s activities; (2) the President has determined that the University should take a position; and (3) the individuals who speak or write on the University’s behalf are specifically authorized to do so.

4. Research Involving Political Campaigns: Any Stanford researcher considering doing research involving political campaigns should consult with the General Counsel’s Office for any legal restrictions, and should submit the research proposal in advance to Stanford’s Institutional Review Board as appropriate under its policies and procedures.

5. Responsibility for Interpretation: the Director of Government and Community Relations, in consultation with the General Counsel, is the administrative officer responsible for interpretation and application of the above guidelines. Questions on whether planned student activities are consistent with the University’s obligations should be directed to the Dean of Students, who will consult with the Director of Government and Community Relations and/or the General Counsel. All other questions on whether planned activities are consistent with the University’s obligations should be addressed directly to the Director of Government and Community Relations or the General Counsel.