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Voters Overwhelmingly Favor Clearer Political Activity Rules for Nonprofits

Poll Shows Support From Both Sides of the Aisle

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Voters overwhelmingly believe that clear rules defining political activity for nonprofits is important, according to a [bipartisan poll](#) released today.

The poll was commissioned by Public Citizen, which released it in conjunction with the Hudson Institute's Bradley Center for Philanthropy & Civic Renewal as part of its mission to be a forum for conversations on important issues in the nonprofit sector.

The poll shows that more than 8 out of 10 voters think it is important to have clear rules in place concerning political activities of nonprofit organizations. This is in stark contrast to the rules as they stand, which are so vague and difficult to administer that they've been partially blamed for last year's targeting scandal, in which some applications for nonprofit status were selected for more intensive review based on the words in their names. The poll also showed that a widely used but misleading argument against new rules – that they would restrict free speech – fails to convince. Six in 10 voters still favored new rules when presented with that argument.

In addition, the poll showed that 80 percent of voters think that organizations taking advantage of unclear regulations is a problem, showing that they are rightly concerned with the consequences that result from the absence of clear rules. Among voters who had an opinion, a majority favored changing the way nonprofit activities are regulated to establish clearer and fairer rules for what counts as political activity. Voters also overwhelmingly favor disclosure of political spending by nonprofits.

The poll was conducted by Lake Research Partners, a Democratic polling firm, and Chesapeake Beach Consulting, a Republican polling firm. The firms conducted a live telephone survey of 800 likely voters between July 26 and July 29. The numbers of Democrats, Republicans and Independents polled reflected the proportions of projected likely national 2014 voters from each of those parties. The margin of error is +/- 3.5 percent.

“The depth of interest in clear rules despite arguments to the contrary shows that voters are ready to see real reforms in nonprofit regulation,” said Celinda Lake, president of Lake Research Partners.

Added Robert Carpenter, president of Chesapeake Beach Consulting, “It’s telling that voters are so concerned with the consequences of vague rules, with that concern stretching across party lines.”

The poll comes as the IRS works to redraft a proposal that could provide just the sort of clarity for nonprofit political activity that voters and nonprofits say they want. In November 2013, the IRS proposed rules for political activity for 501(c)(4) groups – social welfare organizations that can expend up to 49 percent of their resources on political activity. But those rules were widely criticized for limiting democratic participation by nonprofits. The agency plans to release a new draft in early 2015.

“The nonprofit sector is a valued asset to voters, and they do not want to see it corrupted by secret political spending,” said Lisa Gilbert, director of Public Citizen’s Congress Watch division. “On an issue that garners extremely partisan rhetoric, the voters are speaking with a unified voice in favor of new rules.”

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The Bright Lines Project, housed at Public Citizen, has been working for years to create clear, fair rules that would apply to all nonprofits and would encourage nonpartisan civic engagement while removing opportunities for abuse.