

# Nonprofits Need a Strong, Unified Voice to Lobby Government, Report Says

*By Doug Donovan*

Nonprofits need a single organization to spearhead a national advocacy network to champion public policies that help charities and foundations, especially as Washington seems poised to consider an overhaul of the federal tax code, says a [new report](#).

A two-year study involving more than 100 interviews with experts and studies of 500 advocacy efforts was released Wednesday by Independent Sector, a coalition of charities and foundations. The report estimated that it would cost \$20-million over four years to establish a national organization to push a nonprofit agenda.

“The current fiscal climate demands a strong nonprofit voice on public-policy matters now more than ever,” says the report. “The sector must be well positioned to respond to public-policy initiatives concerning tax laws that affect charitable and philanthropic organizations.”

Diana Aviv, chief executive of [Independent Sector](#), says challenges to tax laws that benefit charities and donors should spur nonprofits into action. No matter who wins the election, she says, lawmakers will come under pressure to change the tax code, given the huge federal deficit. “There is a great urgency now that we haven’t seen in decades,” Ms. Aviv says.

## **Finding a Leader**

But nonprofit groups won’t succeed in meeting those challenges unless they pool their resources and develop common long-term goals to achieve consistent success, the report states.

Current advocacy efforts often fall short for several reasons: limited resources, “boards who don’t understand all of the elements necessary for an effective campaign,” and a reluctance to work with groups that hold “conflicting positions,” the report says.

Another big reason for failure, said the report, is that nonprofits tend to get involved in advocacy only when they face an immediate threat, such as proposals to limit the charitable deduction, rather than working long-term to make a strong push to pass policies that would benefit charities and foundations.

What’s more, nonprofit officials interviewed for the study agreed that “no leader has stepped forward to unify sector organizations around a shared long-term vision,” the report says.

At a news conference to unveil the report, Ms. Aviv declared that “our sector can neither rely on serendipity, a sudden promising opportunity in the policy arena, nor can we continue to play exclusively a defensive, reactive role only in a time of crisis. Mostly by then it’s too little too late.”

Designating a central organization “won’t be easy because we think that change is difficult and resources are limited,” Ms. Aviv said.

Nor are there many organizations considered a central voice now.

The groups that were most often identified by Washington political and opinion leaders as “leading efforts on sector-wide issues” were, in order, Independent Sector, the [National Council of Nonprofits](#), the [Council on Foundations](#), the [Urban Institute](#), and the [American Society of Association Executives](#).

### **Perceived Waste and Abuse**

Organizations that represent foundations and charities in Washington need to improve how they communicate nonprofits’ benefits to society, the study found.

A survey commissioned by Independent Sector found that government officials and other influential people in Washington have a positive perception of nonprofits as “organizations that provide services to help others, provide an alternative to government, are motivated by the common good, and provide a vehicle for engaging communities, fostering altruism, and allowing the public to donate resources to benefit others.”

But the study did identify some concerns, including worries that some charities waste money, spend a lot on bureaucracy, do little to prevent fraud, and undertake “inappropriate” political activities.

Those officials also said corporations “have a greater influence on public-policy decisions in Washington, D.C., than do nonprofit organizations,” according to the study.

The study hopes its findings will change that dynamic.

It identified five “essentials of successful advocacy” by studying successful nonprofit, corporate, and political campaigns. They are:

- "Sustain a laser-like focus on long-term goals."
- "Prioritize 'building' the elements for an effective advocacy campaign."
- "Consider the motivations of public officials."
- "Galvanize coalitions to achieve short-term goals."
- "Ensure strong, high-integrity leadership"

To illustrate the effectiveness of being “laser-like,” the study provided a case study about Grover Norquist’s [Americans for Tax Reform](#). The organization has worked since 1985 with one long-range goal: to reduce the size of government by curtailing federal revenue. The group’s Taxpayer Protection Pledge, urging politicians to vow never to raise taxes or risk being voted out of office, “has reshaped what it means to be a member of the Republican Party,” the report says.

Ms. Aviv said she was struck by the importance successful advocates place on long-term efforts to build ties to government officials, including concerted efforts to conduct research for policy makers, developing coalitions of like-minded groups, and regularly communicating about an organization’s mission.

As an example, Independent Sector provided a case study on the [Human Rights Campaign](#), founded in 1980 to promote equality for gay people. Overcoming homophobia in an increasingly conservative Congress required a long-term commitment. The group’s efforts outside the legislative arena and within the realms of regulations eventually led to major policy victories: passage of hate-crimes legislation, repeal of “don’t ask, don’t tell” for military service members, and defeat of a federal measure to define marriage as a union of a man and woman.

The campaign succeeded because it relied on long-term ties to government officials, built by getting inside their motivations for voting in favor of the Human Rights Campaign agenda.

Forging alliances does not necessarily mean collaborating only with like-minded players, the report says. Sometimes collaborating with enemies can be just as effective as working with allies. Take the Patriots Defending the Bill of Rights, for example. The group was formed by two unlikely partners: the liberal [American Civil Liberties Union](#) and the [American Conservative Union](#). Together they fought to limit the government’s surveillance powers granted under the Patriot Act following the attacks of September 11.

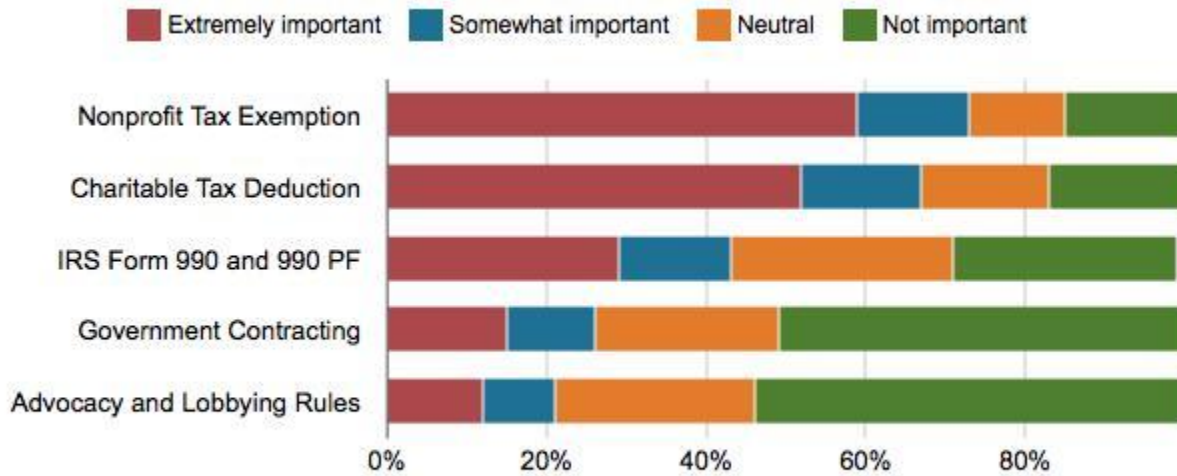
### **An Agenda for Action**

Interviews with nonprofit leaders and others led Independent Sector to identify the following concerns as the top agenda items for a coordinated advocacy effort. They are:

- Changes that could limit the organizations eligible for charity status.
- Threats to charitable tax deductions for donors.
- A need to clarify advocacy and lobbying rules for charities and private foundations.
- Changes to Internal Revenue Service disclosure forms that could hamper nonprofit operations.
- Burdensome paperwork and red tape involving government contracts with nonprofits.
- Lack of government-financed research on the nonprofit world.

“Our sector has the power to create a regulatory and legislative environment more favorable to our work and the people we serve,” Ms. Aviv said. “But to do that, we need to make our voices heard.”

### How Nonprofit Leaders Rank the Importance of 5 Federal Issues



**SOURCE:** Independent Sector