

Why Political Neutrality?

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Most city and county managers are so comfortable with the principle of political neutrality that they cannot imagine getting involved in anything more political than voting on election day. Others struggle within the constraints of Tenet 7 of the ICMA Code of Ethics, which admonishes members: “Refrain from all political activities which undermine public confidence in professional administrators. Refrain from participation in the election of the members of the employing legislative body.” It is difficult for these managers to picture some of the conflicts that develop when an appointed administrator gets involved in a highly visible political activity.

Political neutrality helps protect a local government manager’s reputation for fairness and impartiality. One city manager was censured for publicly criticizing the actions of a group of councilmembers who were running for reelection. He gave little thought to the fact that the group he criticized was from one political party, or that the opponents would see his statements as partisan favoritism. He argued that he had “praised and criticized both Republicans and Democrats on an issue-by-issue basis.” The city manager’s credibility for impartiality was further undermined by the fact that he had served as the chairman of a political party—not surprisingly, the same political party that sought to unseat the councilmembers he had criticized.

The ICMA Executive Board has revised its guideline on elections and adopted a new one on running for office, to further clarify the member’s responsibility to avoid political activities that might undermine a manager’s reputation for professionalism:

***Running for office.** Members shall not run for elected office or become involved in political activities related to running for elected office. They shall not seek political endorsements, financial contributions, or engage in other campaign activities.*

***Elections.** Members share with their fellow citizens the right and responsibility to vote and to voice their opinions on public issues. However, in order not to impair their effectiveness on behalf of the local governments they serve, they shall not participate in political activities to support the candidacy of individuals running for any city, county, special district, school, state, or federal offices. Specifically, they shall not endorse candidates, make financial contributions, sign or circulate petitions, or participate in fund-raising activities for individuals seeking or holding elected office.*

Some ICMA members have questioned why it is important for them to avoid making financial contributions to candidates for office, or attending a fund-raising event for a candidate. Some years ago, a city manager defended his decision to make small donations to candidates for the city council because he had supported two candidates: a Republican and a Democrat. Sadly, even though the community operates under the council-manager form of government, some candidates assumed that it was typical for managers to give campaign contributions. One candidate for the council even said he would expect all appointed city employees to donate to his next campaign.

Fortunately, other councilmembers disagreed, pointing out that a truly professional manager would never make a political contribution to someone who might be acting as his or her supervisor. It’s

never good for a local government manager to get involved in partisan politics, one of these councilmembers commented. And, from ICMA's point of view, the manager has a responsibility to treat all members—or prospective members—of the governing body equally and impartially.

But what about campaign contributions to other political offices, such as seats in the state legislature? What problems might these contributions cause? Perhaps, the most obvious problem is that campaign contributions to candidates necessarily show up as support for a particular party. Local government managers' reputations for impartiality are harmed if they become identified with any such partisan political activity.

And in today's world of term limits, there may be another unexpected surprise for the local government manager in the future. In time, these same state legislators may be looking for other political offices after serving out their maximum terms. Before long, the managers who supported them might see their former state legislator running for mayor or for an opening on the county board of supervisors.

As one manager has reflected, "Tempting though it may be to wish to support candidates who are sympathetic to the issues of local government management, candidates may have a wider manifesto. By supporting particular candidates, the member could be seen by the public to be endorsing publicly a candidate running in a series of campaigns of which local government management is only one. In my view, the safest course is to follow the guideline on elections to the letter and not be involved personally or with an organization which campaigns for candidates for the state legislature."

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