

# Explaining Nonpartisanship

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## **1. Political vs. Partisan vs. Non-partisan vs. Multi-partisan**

Dogwood Initiative is an issue-based advocacy organization trying to engage British Columbians in their democracy. We are unapologetically **political**. In fact, almost everything we do is political.

Being **political** to us means engaging citizens to have control over government decisions that affect them. It means helping connect people to points of power at all levels of government.

The fight to reclaim local decision-making power over projects that would affect our homes and future is supported by a **wide range of groups and political parties**, as well as their caucus members and candidates. Dogwood Initiative has supporters from all across the political spectrum and that opens us up to work with unlikely allies.

In the context of our work, **partisanship** is defined as supporting one political party. Being **non-partisan** is defined as not supporting one political party over another – being free from party affiliation.

While Dogwood Initiative has traditionally identified itself as being a non-partisan organization, this description can produce more confusion than clarity. Some people assume being non-partisan means we aren't political, but that's not the case. We believe our job is to push all political parties to step outside their comfort zone and act to promote justice, equality and sustainability – and to give more decision-making power to people most impacted by major resource projects.

As Dogwood has evolved – and our pro-democracy work expanded – we’ve begun to identify ourselves more as a **multi-partisan** organization. Our hope is that the multi-partisan characterization will better reflect the way we work.

Back when Barack Obama was an organizer in 1988, he described what we’re also trying to achieve:

“... the only way for communities to build long-term power is by organizing people and the money [they raise] around a common vision; and that a viable organization can only be achieved if a **broadly based indigenous leadership**—and not one or two charismatic leaders—can **knit together the diverse interests of their local institutions.**” [[Alinsky for the Left: The Politics of Community Organizing](#)]

Dogwood’s Energy & Democracy Director Kai Nagata dug into this concept in his March 2015 blog post, [Climate Change is not a Left-Right Issue](#). As he puts it, the choice we face is whether to hunker down into polarized political camps, or reach out and find ways to work together. In other words, we will remain powerless as long as we remain isolated and divided.

For the purposes of simple, effective door conversations, organizers may wish to use the non-partisan frame when challenged on the topic of endorsements, or the multi-partisan frame when advocating democratic inclusivity.

There are many different ways to discuss these concepts. This document is intended to help inform conversations organizers have at the doorstep and with their local candidates.

## 2. Endorsements

*An endorsement is telling someone who to vote for.*

*Dogwood provides research on issues of shared concern.*

When it comes to elections, we’re working to become a trusted source of insight, analysis and empowerment for citizens left unsatisfied by existing institutions.

Dogwood Initiative has been around for 15 years and in that time the organization has never endorsed a political party or candidate for public office. The rationale for not endorsing has to do with Canada’s increasingly polarized political arena: once an organization begins to endorse candidates, it is difficult to maintain the perception of non-partisanship, which is essential to an organization such as Dogwood Initiative that draws its support from across the political spectrum. Our concern is that endorsing could inhibit our ability to build the big tent of British Columbians needed to effect real democratic change.

We've been accused by many campaigns of supporting their opponents and we've played close to the line, but we have never crossed it. We have never told supporters for whom to cast their ballot, nor have we allowed candidates to use the Dogwood brand.

That doesn't mean the door is entirely closed. While Dogwood Initiative will never endorse one political party over another, one day we may encounter a candidate in a race where we know we have the numbers, we know our teams can be decisive and there's clear evidence to suggest that without a formal endorsement, our efforts would be in vain.

Even though the door technically remains open, the chance of us breaking with tradition remains slim. If it were a question of electing a government that would listen to the people of British Columbia and cancel unwanted oil tanker proposals or coal exports, there would be room for discussion. But that day has yet to arrive.

### 3. Election Survey and Polling

***Comparisons between candidates are not endorsements.***

***We provide information about candidates so voters can conduct their own analysis.***

Dogwood is a multi-partisan organization founded on the idea that every citizen has the ability to make independent decisions in the best interests of their community.

We do not issue endorsements or tell supporters how to vote – we provide accurate, unbiased information that voters might find helpful during an election.

Dogwood Initiative continues to develop its qualitative survey methodology for comparing candidates in a given riding. The 2015 federal election candidate survey will help evaluate values, electability and record of action.

Compatible values include a commitment to better democratic representation and accountability, respect for local decision-making power and recognition that oil tanker expansion and U.S. thermal coal exports are opposed by a democratic majority of First Nations and British Columbians. The survey will help Dogwood supporters identify candidates who share those values and priorities.

Dogwood will also conduct telephone polling in swing ridings to determine which candidates have the best chance at winning. This information will be provided as a service for journalists, supporters and members of the public who may wish to know how their neighbours are intending to vote.

#### 4. Basic Talking Points

- Partisanship means endorsing a political party or candidate
- Being non-partisan means being free from political affiliation
- Being multi-partisan makes us relatable to different kinds of groups
- Comparisons between candidates are not endorsements
- An endorsement is telling someone who to vote for
- Dogwood has been around for 15 years and never endorsed a party or candidate
- We have never told anyone how to vote
- We believe in the capacity of people to make free and informed choices
- We offer factual information about issues that matter to British Columbians
- Our survey helps voters identify candidates who share their values
- Candidates are ranked on value comparisons, electability and track record
- Telephone polling shows who has the best shot at winning
- Every citizen has the ability to make decisions in the best interests of their community
- Dogwood Initiative has supporters from across the political spectrum
- Energy use and democracy aren't left-wing vs. right-wing issues
- Our job is to turn out as many voters to the polls as possible

#### 5. Common Questions

Here are some examples of common questions organizers get asked while canvassing, paired with suggested answers:

**Who should I vote for?**

*We don't tell people how to vote, but you might find some of our research useful.*

**Is this an endorsement?**

*Nope! That's how candidates answered our survey and we thought you might like to review our findings.*

**Aren't you pulling for the Greens / NDP / Liberals?**

*Dogwood doesn't endorse candidates or parties. We're an issue-based advocacy organization working to engage more British Columbians in their democracy.*

**Isn't it more effective to get behind one candidate?**

*We're not going to tell you how to vote. We do collect polling information, which can give you a sense of how your neighbours are planning to vote.*

**How can you be political, but non-partisan?**

*Being political means engaging citizens to have control over government decisions that affect them. It means helping connect people to points of power, like elections. We encourage everybody to vote – but we can't tell people who to vote for.*

**Will Dogwood Initiative ever endorse a party or candidate?**

*Dogwood Initiative will never endorse a political party. So far in 15 years of campaigns we have not endorsed a candidate. But we do compare candidates on important issues and share those facts with you.*

**Would you ever get behind a conservative candidate?**

*Dogwood Initiative is non-partisan. We believe good ideas come from all across the political spectrum. If a conservative candidate were willing to buck the party line and stand up for the right of local people to make decisions over projects that affect them, we would happily share that information with constituents.*

**How can you call yourself nonpartisan if you hate the Conservatives?**

*We don't hate the Conservatives. Dogwood Initiative has supporters from across the political spectrum, many of whom who share traditional conservative values such as responsible stewardship of lands and rights of local people.*

**How can you call yourself progressive if you don't hate the Conservatives?**

*It's a myth that conservatives don't care about the environment. Conservatism includes traditional values like respect for nature and individual freedoms. That said, we are highly critical of any elected representative that puts their party agenda ahead of their constituents.*

## **6. Understanding Hostility**

Sometimes, being non-partisan or multi-partisan will bring out the vitriol in those who are partisan supporters of one political party or another. There are Dogwood organizers who have experienced others' frustration at our refusal to "pick a side" or endorse their favoured candidate.

The fact is, only a tiny fraction of Canadians are members of a political party or are deeply partisan by nature. For every partisan person who cares deeply about the fortunes of their electoral tribe, there are several pragmatists who just want responsible, accountable representatives. We are the majority in that regard.

The unfortunate reality is that some politicians you will encounter are fundamentally self-interested. Understanding their motivations and what feeds their ego will help you to steer them in helpful directions. It also helps make hostile incidents feel less personal.

The key thing to remember is that we have faith in the capacity of ordinary people to make free and informed choices in the public interest. That you're part of a group of citizens working together to fight an undemocratic system that would force unwanted projects on an unwilling province – and no one deserves hostility because of that.

Organizers like you who are wholeheartedly engaging in your local democratic process will drive transformative change in this province and country. If you experience hostility from someone who says being nonpartisan is ineffective, it's possible they're nervous about how just effective you can be.