

# **Political Neutrality**

## Te Noho Taiapa

Your Political Neutrality  
Decision-Making  
Assistant



**New Zealand Government**  
Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa



Political neutrality is about serving New Zealand's democratically elected government to the best of our professional abilities, irrespective of our own personal opinions.

Read this guide to help answer some commonly asked questions about political neutrality as a public servant.

## **What do I need to know about general political activity and involvement in elections?**

For most public servants, participating in politics outside the workplace is unlikely to breach their agency's political neutrality obligations. However, there may be circumstances where it is difficult to reconcile personal political interests with performing a public sector role.

Whether a particular political interest or activity might impact on a work role, and whether it can be managed, may depend on the:

- seniority of the role
- nature of the role
- scope and scale of the political activity.

Public servants involved with a political party or who intend to comment publicly on political matters need to be careful that they do not:

- reveal advice given to Ministers,
- disclose information they are not authorised to disclose,
- purport to express an agency view when they are giving their own view, or
- criticise government policy with which they have been professionally involved.

Stricter requirements apply to public servants who are very senior, have regular direct contact with ministers or represent a public face of their agency.

## **What do I need to know about protests as a public servant?**

For most public servants, participating in politics outside the workplace is unlikely to breach their agency's political neutrality obligations.

The following are practical considerations for attending a lawful protest:

*Keep your politics out of your job and your job out of your politics.*

- Personal capacity – attendance is in own time; outside work hours or annual leave.
- Seniority of role – level of contact with ministers and/or as a public spokesperson.
- Agency identity – no visible markers; lanyards, uniforms, name tags, etc.
- Agency resources – no use of any agency resources such as printers for posters, etc.
- Social media – keep private social media activity separate from work life.
- Public perception – consider the nature and circumstances of the protest and potential implications for public trust in the Public Service.

Stricter requirements apply to public servants who are very senior, have regular direct contact with ministers or represent a public face of their agency.

## **Can I discuss politics at work?**

While public servants have the same rights of political expression as other members of the public, public servants must respect other people's rights and interests in the workplace and avoid behaving in a way that undermines the political neutrality of the public service.

Chatting about politics or policy in a private conversation with interested colleagues is acceptable, but more overt, politically partisan conduct, may not be. For example, it is not appropriate to:

- wear political party advertising on a t-shirt in the workplace
- campaign for a political party or a candidate in the workplace
- provide work contact details to political parties
- engage with political parties while at work.

Acting responsibly means that public servants should advise their manager if they receive emails from political parties at work and will not respond to or forward emails from political parties to other public servants or agencies.

## **Can I share my political views on social media?**

Public servants are free to use social media in their private lives. The Standards of Integrity and Conduct, political neutrality obligations and agencies' own policies apply to all media communications outside work, as with other forms

*Keep your politics out of your job and your job out of your politics.*

of communication. There should be a clear separation between public servants' work role and their personal use of social media.

Private comments can become public on social media, so it always pays to think before posting material online and to exercise good judgement when sending a post.

While some aspects of social media may be outside a user's control, public servants are expected to take reasonable care that their social media communications do not undermine the political neutrality of the Public Service. Maintaining political neutrality in a work role means separating personal political comments in any media, including on social media, from work life. For example, public servants must not link their personal political comments to their LinkedIn work profile.

More information can be found [here](#).

## **What do I need to know about talking to the media?**

Public servants are free to talk to the media and use social media in their private lives, in the same way as other citizens.

Public servants are expected to take reasonable care that any media communications do not undermine the political neutrality of the Public Service. Maintaining political neutrality in a work role means separating personal political comments in any media from work life.

For example, a public servant could appear in a TV interview in their capacity as a charity volunteer, where it is clear that they are not representing a public sector agency.

The Standards of Integrity and Conduct, political neutrality obligations and agencies' own policies apply to all media communications outside work, as with other forms of communication.

## **What are the considerations for public servants who are members of a profession?**

Public servants who are members of professions with their own professional obligations or code of ethics need to consider how these fit with their political neutrality responsibilities as public servants.

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For example, members of a profession may wish to comment publicly in a personal capacity on work-related matters within their areas of expertise. Members should be open and honest in their actions. This will involve raising the matter first with the agency and not disclosing official information that has not been made public. Public servants in this situation should not enter into debate criticising or advocating for particular politicians or political parties or comment on particular political party policies.

## **What do I need to know about unions as a public servant?**

Public servants have the right to join and be active in trade unions. Participating in the lawful activities of unions within government workplaces is acceptable at all times.

As a consequence of this right, there may sometimes be an expression of political views inside a workplace. Political expression and participation should normally be undertaken in the individual's own time. To the extent that union activity leads to political expression within the workplace, this should be carried out in a reasonable way and respect normal business operations. These activities should not be visible to the general public.

Distribution and discussing union materials in the workplace does not breach a public servant's obligations around political neutrality. It is important that public servants continue to carry out their job without letting their personal views or interests influence their advice and behavior and act without bias towards one political party or another.

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