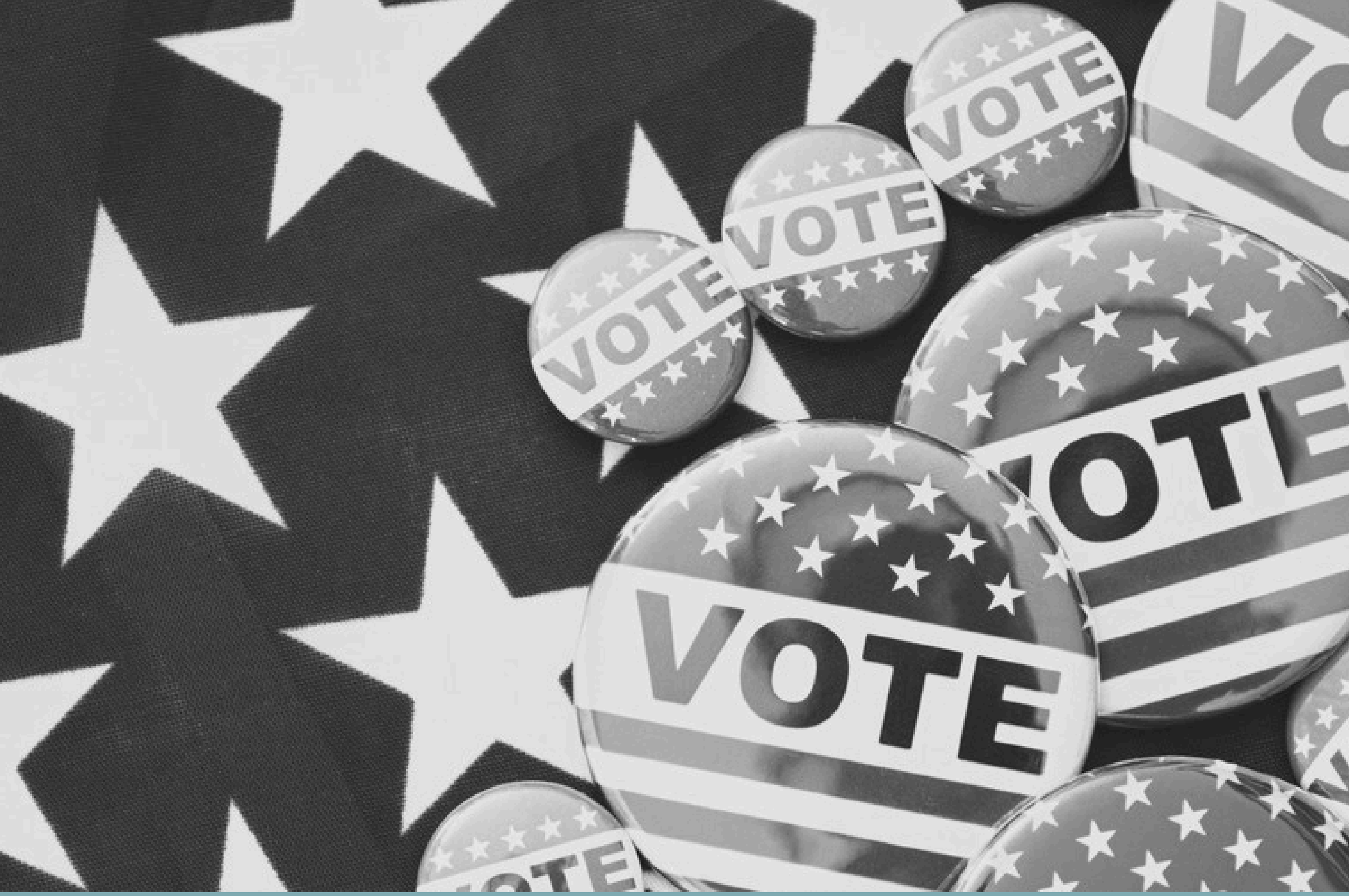

ECA Votes

2026 Midterm Election Guide

A nonpartisan guide to the public policy issues shaping the future of the U.S. business and professional events industry.

EXHIBITIONS & CONFERENCES ALLIANCE

Public policy will impact the future of business and professional events.

Introduction

Business and professional events bring people together to exchange ideas, build relationships, introduce new products, grow businesses, and strengthen communities.

They are also affected every day by decisions made in Washington, D.C., and in state capitals and cities nationwide.

Tariff policy can change the cost of exhibiting. Visa policy can determine whether an international participant can attend. Workforce programs can help employers find skilled workers. Tax policy can affect industry growth. Federal regulations can influence how events and venues operate.

That is why elections matter to our industry.

Learn. Engage. Vote.

ECA Votes is the industry's voter registration and education resource designed to empower everyone across the industry to make their voices heard on election day.

ECA Votes is nonpartisan.

Its purpose is to help industry professionals:

LEARN about public policy issues that matter.

ENGAGE in the political process.

VOTE on election day.

2.6 million

American jobs

$400 billion

U.S. economic impact

99%

U.S. small businesses

7 public policy issues to know in 2026

Safeguarding events

Good policy should solve problems without creating unnecessary barriers to bringing people together.

Government agencies have important responsibilities, from protecting national security and enforcing customs laws to ensuring that federal funds are used appropriately.

But policies designed to address legitimate concerns can also have unintended consequences for events, exhibitors, venues, and attendees.

In 2026, several federal proposals have raised questions about how to achieve government objectives without unnecessarily making U.S. events harder to organize, attend, or participate in.

Why it matters

Business events sit at the intersection of commerce, travel, technology, and public policy.

An overly broad rule can make it harder for an exhibitor to introduce a new product, an attendee to participate in a conference, or a venue to make routine operating decisions.

Federal conference and venue rules

In May, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) proposed changes to the government-wide rules governing federal financial assistance. Among them, conference costs would generally be allowable only when participation was expressly approved by the federal agency and included in the award's terms. ECA also raised concerns about proposed federal conditions affecting event services provided by venues.

Congress enacted a continuing resolution on September 2 that prevents OMB from issuing or finalizing this proposed rule, or a substantially similar one, through December 11. The underlying rulemaking remains pending.

Showcasing emerging technologies

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is considering whether longstanding exceptions that allow certain products to be operated at trade shows before final equipment authorization should continue to apply to some covered communications equipment. The FCC's proposal explicitly asks about the existing trade-show demonstration exception.

On September 8, ECA submitted comments to the FCC on behalf of 100 industry organizations asking the agency to preserve the exemption while maintaining appropriate national security protections.

Customs and international exhibitors

A June executive order directs the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to strengthen importer-of-record requirements, including higher bonding, additional disclosures, enhanced vetting, and additional requirements for foreign importers. Those changes could have practical implications for international exhibitors temporarily bringing goods, equipment, and samples into the United States.

ECA’s perspective

Federal agencies should be able to accomplish legitimate regulatory, enforcement, and national security objectives without creating unnecessary barriers to attending, exhibiting at, or operating U.S. business and professional events.

ECA supports clear, targeted policies that account for how events operate in practice and consider potential effects on organizers, exhibitors, venues, and attendees.

Questions for candidates

How would you ensure that federal agencies address legitimate regulatory and national-security objectives without creating unnecessary barriers for U.S. businesses, events, and their customers?

What role should Congress play in overseeing federal rules that significantly affect conferences, trade shows, exhibitors, and venues?

Trade and tariffs

Keeping events affordable and reducing uncertainty for those that make them possible.

U.S. business and professional events depend on the movement of goods across borders.

Exhibitors import products to display and demonstrate. Suppliers source equipment and materials globally. Organizers rely on exhibitors and customers whose businesses are themselves affected by international trade.

Changes in tariff and trade policy can therefore ripple through the entire event ecosystem.

Why it matters

Tariffs are collected at the border, but their economic effects extend much farther.

Higher import costs can affect organizers, suppliers, exhibitors, and their customers. Frequent changes in tariff rates and trade rules can also make planning harder.

That matters particularly in an industry built around small businesses: small businesses represent 99% of industry companies and more than 80% of exhibitors.

A changing tariff landscape

In February, the Supreme Court held that the International Emergency Economic Powers Act did not authorize the president to impose tariffs. The administration subsequently introduced new tariffs using more legally certain legal authorities.

In July, the U.S. Trade Representative imposed new tariffs on 60 economies following investigations involving their treatment of imports produced with forced labor. The new duties are generally 10% or 12.5%, with specified exemptions.

ECA has distinguished between the objective of combating forced labor and its concerns about the potential downstream effects of broad tariffs on U.S. businesses.

North American trade uncertainty

The U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) remains in force, but the United States declined in July to extend the agreement automatically for another 16 years. That moves the agreement into continuing review while the three countries discuss outstanding issues.

For the events industry, the larger question is predictability: knowing the trade rules under which they can plan, invest, and operate.

ECA's perspective

ECA supports trade and tariff policies that preserve affordability, reduce uncertainty, and strengthen the competitiveness of our industry and its customers.

Questions for candidates

How should the United States address unfair trade practices while limiting unintended costs and uncertainty for American small businesses and downstream industries?

What approach would you support for maintaining stable and predictable trade relationships with major U.S. partners, including Canada and Mexico?

International travel

Keeping the U.S. open and competitive for global business.

International exhibitors introduce products and innovations. International buyers create opportunities for U.S. companies. International attendees bring expertise, business activity, and spending into American communities.

When international participants cannot get here, U.S. events lose more than visitors.

They lose business. So does our country.

Why it matters

The United States competes with destinations around the world for exhibitions, conferences, conventions, and meetings.

These events attract attendees, exhibitors, and buyers from around the world to share knowledge and conduct business in the U.S., which drives economic growth, supports job creation, and empowers U.S. small businesses.

These events also drive demand for restaurants, hotels, travel services, and Main Street commerce in cities and towns nationwide.

Getting a visa appointment

As of September 17, there are 43 U.S. embassies and consulates around the world with visitor visa interview waits exceeding three months, although that represented an improvement from the prior year.

In July, the Department of State launched a pilot program at selected posts allowing eligible visitor visa applicants to pay an additional $750 for access to an interview within 10 business days, subject to availability. The expedited appointment does not guarantee visa issuance or accelerate post-interview processing.

Other barriers to participation

The State Department also currently requires certain otherwise eligible visitor visa applicants from 50 countries to post visa bonds of $10,000, $15,000, or $20,000. This visa bond program is likely to add additional countries in the near future.

Last December, CBP proposed more stringent social media vetting of travelers from Visa Waiver Program countries. While CBP has publicly softened its stance on that proposal, it remains outstanding.

The key question: Can they get here?

An international participant may need to:

Apply for a visa → secure an interview → receive a decision → arrange travel → enter the U.S. → arrive in time for the event

Delays anywhere along that path can affect participation. So can uncertainty about the underlying policies and processes.

ECA's perspective

ECA supports policies that lower barriers to attracting international exhibitors, attendees, and buyers, including shorter visa wait times, modernized processing, and fewer unnecessary fees or overly restrictive policies.

Questions for candidates

What steps would you support to make U.S. visa processing more timely and predictable while maintaining appropriate national security screening?

How should the U.S. balance security and immigration-enforcement objectives with the need to remain globally competitive for legitimate international business travel?

Taxes

Supporting the organizations and businesses that power the U.S. events economy.

Business and professional events are supported by a diverse ecosystem of associations, nonprofits, independent organizers, venues, suppliers, exhibitors, and entrepreneurs.

Tax policy can influence their ability to invest, hire, convene their communities, and grow.

Why it matters

For the industry, competitive business tax rates unlock growth and future investment.

For nonprofit associations, tax policy can affect their ability to educate, credential, advocate for, and serve their members.

For event businesses, state and local taxes can raise costs even when those taxes were originally designed to target another sector.

The question is whether tax policy strengthens the organizations and businesses that create economic and community value or creates unintended costs elsewhere in the economy.

Protecting nonprofit tax-exempt status

In August, Representatives Greg Steube and Suzan DelBene introduced the bipartisan Safeguarding America's Nonprofits Act. The bill would clarify that exemption from federal income tax does not itself constitute receipt of federal financial assistance.

This important legislation clarifies that a nonprofit's federal tax-exempt status does not subject them to regulations that Congress never intended for them.

Taxes that reach beyond their original target

Maryland's digital advertising tax provides another example.

While that tax targeted large digital advertising companies, costs were passed through to customers, including organizers, exhibitors, and venues.

In August, the Maryland Tax Court ruled against the tax.

The broader lesson: A tax aimed at one sector can create costs elsewhere in the economy, including our industry's small businesses and those who rely on them.

ECA's perspective

ECA supports federal, state, and local tax policies that enhance our industry's competitiveness and opposes measures that disproportionately harm the business and professional events ecosystem.

Questions for candidates

What principles should guide federal tax policy toward nonprofit associations and other tax-exempt organizations?

When considering new taxes, how should lawmakers evaluate whether the costs could ultimately reach small businesses and consumers outside the sector being taxed?

Workforce development

Building the next generation of the business and professional events workforce.

Business and professional events depend on skilled professionals working in logistics, audiovisual production, exhibit construction, hospitality, venue operations, transportation, technology, and many other fields.

Finding, training, and retaining those workers is essential to the industry's long-term growth.

Why it matters

Many careers in business events do not require a traditional four-year degree.

They do require skills.

That creates a public-policy opportunity: expand pathways that allow people to obtain the education, training, and credentials employers actually need.

Workforce Pell Grants

The new Workforce Pell program took effect in 2026. Beginning July 1, institutions became able to seek federal approval for new qualifying short-term workforce programs.

The Department of Education estimates an average of about 187,000 Pell Grant recipients per year in eligible workforce programs between fiscal years 2027 and 2035.

For ECA, the core objective is ensuring that approved programs are high-quality, responsive to real employer demand, and connected to meaningful career opportunities.

529 plans and professional certifications

Federal law now allows qualifying 529 savings plan distributions to cover certain postsecondary certification expenses, including tuition, books, supplies, equipment, and some testing expenses.

That expands the idea of education savings beyond traditional college expenses and can support professional certifications used throughout the association and events ecosystem.

Additional skilled-career pathways

The Jumpstart Savings Act would create new tax-advantaged savings accounts for apprenticeship programs, trade credentials, tools, equipment, and certain skilled-career-related expenses.

This is an important example of policy innovation that can help the industry continue to create moments that matter for many years to come.

ECA's perspective

ECA supports policies that strengthen the industry's ability to recruit, train, and retain its next-generation workforce, including expanded access to high-quality skills training and career credentials.

Questions for candidates

What role should the federal government play in expanding access to high-quality short-term training, apprenticeships, and industry-recognized certifications?

How would you ensure publicly supported workforce programs prepare people for skills and careers that employers actually need?

Operating environment

Giving the industry the certainty and protections it needs to bring people together.

Events require long-term planning.

Organizers sign contracts months or years in advance. Venues schedule major gatherings. Exhibitors invest in products and travel. Suppliers hire workers and purchase equipment.

All depend on a policy environment where major risks can be managed and essential systems operate predictably.

Why it matters

Some public policies affect events not by determining whether an event can happen, but by determining how much uncertainty surrounds it.

Events thrive when businesses can plan for the future with confidence.

Terrorism insurance

The Terrorism Risk Insurance Program is a public-private system providing a federal backstop for certain insured terrorism losses. The current program expires on December 31, 2027.

For the events industry, terrorism coverage is an important risk-management consideration for organizers and venues.

In June, the House of Representatives passed a seven-year extension of the program with a bipartisan vote of 373–15. On September 16, the Senate Banking Committee favorably reported its seven-year Terrorism Risk Insurance Act reauthorization bill unanimously.

Government funding disruptions

Federal shutdowns significantly impact business and professional event travel.

The 43-day shutdown in late 2025 produced an estimated $6.1 billion in travel-related economic losses and disrupted millions of travelers, according to analysis commissioned by the U.S. Travel Association.

For business and professional events, the broader concern is maintaining reliable transportation and other essential services during future federal funding disputes

ECA's perspective

ECA supports a competitive and predictable operating environment that enables innovation and growth while helping industry businesses manage significant risks.

Questions for candidates

What policies would you support to help businesses and venues maintain access to insurance against major risks, including terrorism?

How should Congress reduce the effect of federal funding disputes on essential transportation and travel services?

Sustainability

One goal. One playbook. One shared path to Net Zero.

The business and professional events industry is taking tremendous steps to reduce its environmental impact and pursue a path toward net-zero emissions.

The challenge is not only determining where the industry needs to go next.

It is making sure organizations have a clear, consistent, and workable path for getting there.

Why it matters

Events are complex.

Their environmental footprint can involve venue energy, travel, freight, food and beverage, exhibit materials, and waste.

Addressing those impacts requires close collaboration across an interconnected global value chain.

Net Zero by 2050, if not sooner

ECA supports the industry's continued work toward reducing emissions and developing practical solutions that allow events to become more sustainable.

The public policy challenge: coordination

Federal, state, and local governments can each adopt sustainability requirements affecting business and professional events.

When requirements use conflicting definitions, metrics, or reporting systems, organizations have to navigate a tangled web of policies, laws, frameworks, and reporting regimes aimed at similar environmental outcomes.

Industry-led efforts, combined with common-sense policies, will increase sustainability and ensure the industry maintains control of its collective path to Net Zero.

Progress is easier when organizations are working from compatible laws. policies, standards, measurements, and expectations.

ECA's perspective

ECA supports industry-led progress toward Net Zero while encouraging streamlined, coordinated public policy rather than conflicting requirements across federal, state, and local governments.

Questions for candidates

What role should the government play in helping industries reduce emissions while allowing for innovation and flexibility to develop effective solutions?

How would you encourage federal, state, and local governments to coordinate sustainability requirements so industries like ours are not subject to conflicting standards aimed at similar environmental goals?

Make your voice heard.

ECAVotes.com is your one-stop resource for everything that you need to know in advance of election day on November 3.

From learning more about the key issues and how to get more involved to registering to vote in your community, ECAVotes.com has got you covered.

Learn

Find out more about the industry's top public policy priorities so that you can see where the candidates on your ballot this November stand.

Engage

Make sure that your voice is heard by candidates during the 2026 election campaign.

Got 5 minutes? 30 minutes? 1 hour? Get the tools, templates, and how-to guides you need so that you can make an impact.

Vote

Make sure that you are ready to hit the polls. You can register to vote, check your voter registration status, and even find out what's on your local.

EXHIBITIONS & CONFERENCES ALLIANCE