

## ADVICE ON THE USE OF VOTER GUIDES IN DIOCESES AND PARISHES

In recent months, the New Jersey Catholic Conference has received a number of inquiries about voter guides and whether such guides are appropriate for distribution in parishes, in publications and in other venues sponsored by the dioceses and/or their parishes.

It should be noted that voter guides are permitted under IRS regulations, if certain conditions are met. However, our experience over the years has shown that voter guides can be problematic for a number of reasons. Sometimes, the guides either explicitly or implicitly endorse one candidate or one party over another, or imply that one is a more acceptable choice for Catholics.

Some voter guides may reveal - intended or not - biases in favor of specific candidates or parties. At times, guides may serve to advance the agenda of the sponsoring organization if they are produced by an outside organization. Voter guides also may deliberately or inadvertently misrepresent party or candidate positions and voting records.

In other cases, the guides may focus so heavily on certain issues that they give insufficient attention to other issues that may be relevant to Church teaching and the election.

While the Church emphasizes that certain issues, such as life, always must weigh more heavily on the conscience of Catholic voters than other issues, it can be problematic if other issues are excluded, both from the perspective of the IRS and from Church teaching. The IRS has expressed caution about focusing on a narrow range of issues, even if the issues are presented accurately and without bias (see [www.usccb.org/ogc/](http://www.usccb.org/ogc/)).

For these reasons, the New Jersey Catholic Conference advises that dioceses and/or their parishes and organizations refrain from using voter guides developed by outside groups. We also advise that dioceses and/or their parishes and organizations refrain from producing their own voter guides, for the reasons outlined above.

Rather, dioceses, parishes and their organizations are encouraged to inform Catholics on the issues at hand and the moral principles that weigh on a properly formed conscience. It is then up to the individual Catholic voter to properly form his or her conscience and then to assess candidate/party positions relative to the issues.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has produced a range of user-friendly materials suitable for educating Catholics about the issues, the importance of voter participation and the importance of a properly formed conscience.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' website has comprehensive information on the Bishops' positions and public policy statements. We urge Catholics to visit the website at [www.faithfulcitizenship.org/](http://www.faithfulcitizenship.org/).

The USCCB Faithful Citizenship material is clear that the Catholic Church does not endorse candidates for elective offices or political parties. Equally clear, the Church does not tell Catholics how to vote or which political party to support. However, the Church does teach Catholics that they have a moral obligation to be faithful citizens, which includes participating in the public policy debate and voting.

When the Church encourages Catholics to participate in the public policy debate, she always reminds the faithful of their serious obligation to properly form their conscience in light of Sacred Scripture and prayerful reflection on Church teaching. It is important to emphasize that Catholics cannot form their conscience in isolation from the teaching of the Church.

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October 2, 2008