

Do's And Don'ts

Political Responsibility Guidelines to Keep in Mind during Election Season



Parishes and other IRS-designated section 501(c)(3) church organizations are prohibited from participating in political campaign activity. Thus, certain political activities that are entirely appropriate for individuals may not be undertaken by church organizations or their representatives. The USCCB Office of General Counsel (202-541-3300) provides detailed guidance on what is allowed and not allowed under the law. This detailed guidance is available at www.usccb.org/ogc. In addition, many dioceses and state Catholic conferences provide resources that apply and summarize these guidelines for use by parishes and other church organizations.

Parishes are often asked by candidates or political groups for permission to speak or distribute literature. Many parishes choose only to distribute Faithful Citizenship materials distributed by their diocese, their state Catholic conference, or the USCCB. To avoid violating the political campaign activity prohibition, you should seek the advice of your diocesan attorney or state Catholic conference before giving permission for the distribution of literature or providing the opportunity for candidates to speak. The items in this packet, along with other USCCB resources and the advice and materials provided by your diocese and your state Catholic conference, can help you remain non-partisan and maintain consistency with Catholic teaching.

Activities That are Allowed and Encouraged

According to the USCCB Office of General Counsel, certain activities generally are appropriate for parishes and other Catholic organizations.

Sharing the Principles of Catholic Social Teaching:

Parishes and other Catholic organizations are encouraged to share the Church's teaching on the relationships between Christian faith and political life. The Church's teaching on political responsibility, human life, human rights, and justice and peace need to be shared more widely and effectively. Cards summarizing seven key themes of Catholic social teaching that can serve as guidelines for involvement in public life are available from the USCCB (English pub. no. 5-315, Spanish pub. no. 5-815; call 800-235-8722.) The

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship statement, bulletin insert, and DVD are helpful tools for developing educational programs.

Voter Participation: Parishes and other church organizations can encourage members to participate in the electoral process: to register, to vote, to become informed on a broad range of issues, and to become active in the political life of the community. Parishes and other church organizations can also sponsor non-partisan voter registration and "get out the vote" drives. (See the resource "Ideas for Social Concerns and Pro-Life Committees: Tips for Conducting a Non-Partisan Voter Education Campaign and Voter Registration Drive.")

Ballot Measures: Supporting or opposing ballot measures, including referenda, initiatives, constitutional amendments, and similar procedures, is considered "lobbying" activity and not political campaign activity. Parishes and other church organizations can take positions on such measures and work to support or oppose them within the limits of permitted lobbying activity for section 501(c)(3) organizations. Any questions on these limits should be directed to your diocesan attorney or state Catholic conference.



Voter Education: Parishes and church organizations can and should engage in non-partisan voter education. This may include distributing the results of candidate polls or surveys, so long as these materials have been approved by your diocesan attorney or state Catholic conference. Voter education materials should (1) be consistent with church teaching on political responsibility; (2) cover a wide range of issues important to voters; and (3) exhibit no bias for or against any candidate or party.

Non-Partisanship: The Church does not and will not engage in partisan politics. Pastors may wish to publish the following bulletin announcement in the weeks before the election.

Bulletin Announcement:

We strongly urge all parishioners to register, to become informed on key issues, and to vote. The Church does not support or oppose any candidate, but seeks to focus attention on the moral and human dimensions of issues. We do not authorize the distribution of partisan political materials on parish property.

Activities to Avoid



In order to avoid violating the political campaign activity prohibitions, parishes, other church organizations, and their representatives should remember these guidelines:

- Do not endorse or oppose candidates, political parties, or groups of candidates, or take any action that reasonably could be construed as endorsement or opposition.
- Do not make available the use of church facilities, assets, or members for partisan political purposes.
- Do not authorize distribution of partisan political materials or biased voter education materials (those that support or oppose—or exhibit bias for or against—any candidate or party) on church property, in church publications, or at church activities. Authorization should be given only after materials have been approved by your diocesan attorney.
- Do not invite or permit only selected candidates to address your members. Before inviting candidates, make sure such events are consistent with diocesan policy. If so, it is important that all candidates be invited.

If you have any questions about what is allowed, call your diocesan attorney. Please remember that the IRS rules against political campaign activity also apply to materials posted on parish or other church organization web sites.

While it is important to be clear about what we can't do, the most important thing to focus on is what we can do. In a democracy, loving our neighbor and caring for the least among us means supporting leaders and policies that promote the common good and protect society's most vulnerable members. Helping Catholics to recognize and act on this dimension of their faith is an essential task for parish leaders.

DO'S AND DON'TS FOR PARISHES



DO:

- Address the moral and human dimensions of public issues.
- Share church teaching on human life, human rights, and justice and peace.
- Apply Catholic values to legislation and public issues.
- Conduct a non-partisan voter registration drive on church property.
- Distribute unbiased candidate questionnaires covering issues of human life, justice, and peace that have been reviewed and approved by your diocesan attorney.



DONT:

- Endorse or oppose candidates for political office.
- Distribute partisan campaign literature under church auspices.
- Arrange for groups to work for a candidate for public office.
- Invite only selected candidates to address your church-sponsored group.
- Conduct voter registration slanted toward one party.