

2016

Election Year Guidelines for Catholic Parishes and Organizations



MICHIGAN
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE

The following publication is intended to encourage and facilitate appropriate participation in political activities for Catholic parishes and other 501(c)(3) organizations that qualify for tax-exempt status under the Internal Revenue Code. Included are frequently asked questions and answers as well as common “Dos and Don’ts” that are intended to assist Catholic entities during the 2016 election season.

How involved can Catholic organizations become in elections and politics?

Catholic organizations may — and, in fact, are encouraged to — participate in the political process in a number of ways. While emphasizing conscience formation that focuses on Scripture and Catholic social teaching, a Catholic entity is allowed to discuss the importance of civic participation and the impact issues have on the community and the common good. Catholic entities are also permitted to encourage parishioners to vote, to provide non-partisan voter information, to sponsor voter registration drives, and to advocate for or against ballot issues. Catholic organizations must avoid certain activities, however, that could violate the organization's 501(c)(3) IRS status, such as candidate or party endorsements, in-kind contributions, or other activity that is partisan based.

“The separation of church and state does not require the division between belief and public action, between moral principles and political choices, but protects the rights of believers and religious groups to practice their faith and act on their values in public life.”

USCCB, *Catholics in Political Life*, 2004

Before an election, what issues should a Catholic voter focus on when examining candidates?

The U.S. bishops encourage all Catholics to read and reflect upon the document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, which outlines important issues for Catholics to consider before voting. Some of the issues mentioned include abortion, end-of-life care, marriage, immigration reform, poverty, care for creation, healthcare, restorative justice, and religious freedom. The bishops encourage Catholics to consider the wide range of positions important to the Church, not to be single issue voters, and to weigh each issue according to its moral importance. To read the most recent version of the document and consider these issues, visit www.faithfulcitizenship.org.

“Our nation's tradition of pluralism is enhanced, not threatened, when religious groups and people of faith bring their convictions and concerns into public life.”

USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, 2015

Can any voter guides or election-year materials be distributed in Catholic parishes?

The Michigan Catholic Conference (MCC) Board of Directors welcomes parishes to share election-year material, but **only material that is published by the diocesan bishop, MCC, or the USCCB**. Any other election material cannot be distributed on parish grounds. While other voter guides or questionnaires might offer information about candidate positions, these sources often do not outline positions on the wide range of issues that Catholics are urged to consider before voting. In addition, some of the organizations that prepare voter guides may not be 501(c)(3) organizations, which means that they would not be subject to the same rules as the Church and Church-affiliated organizations.

“Catholic voters should use the framework of Catholic social teaching to examine candidates’ positions on issues affecting human life and dignity as well as issues of justice and peace, and they should consider candidates’ integrity, philosophy, and performance.”

USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, 2015

Is it permissible for Catholic parishes or organizations to post political material on their website or social media accounts?

Similar to guidelines for print media, parishes must be mindful about what they post on websites and social media. Simply linking to candidate-related materials is not necessarily prohibited, but all links must be evaluated based on their context and purpose. If a communication expresses a pro/con opinion about a candidate and is attributable to the organization, the communication should not be posted. Organizations may provide links to candidate websites as long as they list all candidates and present them in a neutral way. If Catholic organizations have any questions about a particular instance, seek local legal advice.

“We are called to bring together our principles and our political choices, our values and our votes, to help build a civilization of truth and love.”

USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, 2015

What if a parish wants to invite candidates to come speak?

Candidates and elected officials can be invited to parishes, as long as certain rules are followed pertaining to 501(c)(3) organizations according to the Internal Revenue Code. If an individual is invited to appear as a candidate, all other candidates for the same office must be provided equal access to appear and must be treated equally. A parish may invite a current public official who happens to be running for office without inviting all other candidates, as long as the purpose is not to promote that individual's candidacy. In the case of a parish school inviting a current State Representative to read to its students, for example, the elected official may not campaign during his or her visit. It is important for elected officials to become familiar with the parish, and vice versa, but in a manner that is non-partisan and consistent with Internal Revenue Service codes and Church guidelines.

“As bishops, we do not endorse or oppose candidates. Rather, we seek to form the consciences of our people so that they can examine the positions of candidates and make choices based on Catholic moral and social teaching.”

USCCB, *Catholics in Political Life*, 2004

What election guidelines exist for political editorials, columns, and letters in Catholic newspapers or magazines?

A Catholic organization that publishes its own newspapers or magazines should avoid printing editorial columns that support or oppose political candidates, as editorials are credited to and paid for by that organization. The Internal Revenue Service has not offered specific advice about letters to the editor on candidates or election campaigns. If included, however, organizations should try to include letters that reflect opinions on both sides of an issue; that come from a source outside of the candidates themselves, their political committees, or organizations that endorse or oppose the candidate; and that are selected in a fair way. The periodical should include a disclaimer that the opinions published do not reflect the opinions of the Catholic organization. Issue or ballot advocacy columns are permissible, especially if Michigan Catholic Conference has taken a position on the issue.

“The statements of columnists appearing in a Catholic periodical are generally attributable to the organization ... Accordingly, prudence dictates that Catholic periodicals reject columns that endorse, support, or oppose candidates.”

USCCB Office of General Counsel, *Political Activity Guidelines*, 2015

Is it okay for pastors and parish staff to endorse, volunteer for, or donate to candidates?

While personal endorsements are not prohibited, it may be difficult to separate one's personal activity from his or her role as a representative of the Church. Pastors and employees, acting in their individual capacities on political matters, should make it clear that they are not acting as representatives of the Church when publically supporting a candidate, as no endorsements or contributions can be made through official Church channels. Additionally, great care must be taken to ensure that none of the organization's resources or facilities are used by the individual on behalf of the campaign, including but not limited to use of the copy machines, envelopes, email, letterhead, parishioner mailing lists, and paid working time.

"As citizens, we should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to a political party or interest group. When necessary, our participation should help transform the party to which we belong."

USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, 2015

Are any election-related signs able to be placed on parish property?

Signs for a particular candidate should not be placed on Church-owned property, as that would be a form of endorsement. Two types of election-related signs, however, are allowed on parish property. The first would be a sign advocating for or against a particular ballot issue. The U.S. bishops have said that the Church is charged with educating and forming the minds and hearts of Catholics, including sharing Church teaching related to public issues. The second example of an acceptable sign is when a Catholic organization, such as a school, places a notice outside on Election Day, indicating the location is a polling place. This activity is non-partisan and, according to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "a manifestation of civic duty." Limited campaign signage or leafleting by local campaign volunteers outside the polling place, as allowed by election rules, should not be linked to the Catholic organization.

"In the end, [the decision of who to vote for] is a decision to be made by each Catholic guided by a conscience formed by Catholic moral teaching."

USCCB, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, 2015

What would be required if a Catholic organization wants to hold a voter registration drive or get-out-the vote drive?

If a Catholic organization is interested in hosting either type of event, they must strive to provide non-partisan voter information. The drive may not be coordinated or conducted along with the candidates, and no partisan literature may be distributed during the drive. If the Catholic organization is hosting a registration drive, they must communicate information about the date of the election and the rules for voting without regard to the particular voter's political preference. If holding a get-out-the vote drive and candidate names are mentioned under each office, parishes must list all without any indication of favoritism.

“We encourage all citizens, particularly Catholics, to embrace their citizenship not merely as a duty and privilege, but as an opportunity meaningfully to participate in building the culture of life. Every voice matters in the public forum. Every vote counts.”

USCCB, *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*, 1998

If the parish is not participating in the event, would it be allowed to rent its facilities to candidates or political parties for events?

In some instances, Catholic parishes or organizations may rent facilities to candidates or political parties for partisan activities. They may not offer the facilities at free or reduced charge to candidates, if that is not the usual renting practice for all outside groups. They also may not make the facility available for rent only to a certain candidate or party; it should be equally available for all. Finally, the Catholic organization should not advertise, promote, or provide other services in connection with the candidate event at its facility. Please note, however, that additional local policies may exist that regulate the use and rental of these facilities. Each organization should check to see what (arch)diocesan policies are in place for their local area.

“Prudence dictates that if a Catholic organization has never rented its facility, its first rental should not be to a candidate or political party.”

USCCB Office of General Counsel, *Political Activity Guidelines*, 2015

Helpful reminders for evaluating political activity at Catholic organizations:

Dos

- Share Catholic Social Teaching and apply these values to legislation, public issues, and ballot issues.
- Advocate for or against a particular ballot proposal.
- Conduct a non-partisan voter registration drive.
- Encourage Catholics to vote after evaluating candidate positions carefully and having developed their conscience.
- Check with the diocesan attorney if there are questions about appropriate activity.

“An authentic faith ... always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it.”

Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013

Don'ts

- Only invite selected candidates to address a church-sponsored group.
- Distribute partisan campaign literature or unapproved election material.
- Endorse/oppose candidates and political parties while acting as a representative of the Church.
- Use organizational resources to participate in political activities or provide financial support for candidates, political parties, or PACs.
- Conduct a voter registration slanted toward one candidate or political party.

“We urge our fellow citizens to see beyond party politics, to analyze campaign rhetoric critically, and to choose their political leaders according to principle, not party affiliation or mere self-interest.”

USCCB, *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*, 1998

Michigan Catholic Conference
Board of Directors reaffirms the long-
standing prohibition of the distribution
of election year material in parishes
unless published by the diocesan
bishop, the Michigan Catholic
Conference, or the United States
Conference of Catholic Bishops.

This pamphlet highlights more common examples of permissible and prohibited election-year activities as published by Office of General Counsel of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. For a more complete understanding of those activities that are or are not legally allowed, please visit the USCCB Political Activities Guidelines website at <http://goo.gl/uCqhoK>. Catholic organizations are also encouraged to check with their diocesan attorney with questions pertaining to political and electoral matters.

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