

2018 Election Year Guidelines

*“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

for Catholic Parishes and Organizations



**MICHIGAN
CATHOLIC**
CONFERENCE

The following publication is intended to facilitate appropriate participation in politics for Catholic parishes, schools, and other 501(c)(3) organizations that qualify for tax-exempt status under the Internal Revenue Code. Included are Frequently Asked Questions and common “Dos and Don’ts” to assist Catholic entities during this 2018 election season.

“All political activity must serve and promote the good of the human person and be based on respect for his or her dignity.”

Pope Francis,
Address to the U.S.
Congress, 9/24/15

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 (USCCB). For a more complete understanding of what is 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 for any questions pertaining to political and electoral matters.

How involved can Catholic organizations become in elections and politics?

Catholic organizations may — and, in fact, are encouraged to — participate in the political process. A Catholic entity is allowed to discuss the importance of civic participation and the impact issues have on the community and the common good. During this discussion, the organization should emphasize the importance of forming one's conscience based on Scripture and Catholic social teaching. Catholic institutions are also permitted to encourage voting, 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 violate the organization's 501(c)(3) Internal Revenue Status (IRS) status. Such activities include candidate or party endorsements, in-kind contributions, or other partisan-based actions.

“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*, 1998

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

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) urges Catholics to reflect upon *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, which outlines critical issues to consider before voting. Some of the issues mentioned include abortion, end-of-life care, marriage, education, immigration reform, poverty, religious freedom, health care, restorative justice, and care for creation. The bishops encourage Catholics to consider the wide range of positions important to the Church, to avoid acting as single-issue voters, and to weigh each issue according to its moral importance. Read the document at www.faithfulcitizenship.org.

Can Catholic entities place election-related signs on their property?

Signs for a particular candidate should not be placed on Church-owned property, as that would be a form of endorsement. Two 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 places a notice outside on Election Day, indicating the location is a polling place. This activity is nonpartisan and, according to the USCCB, “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.

“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

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

The Michigan Catholic Conference (MCC) Board of Directors welcome parishes to share election-year material, but **only material published by the diocesan bishop, MCC, or the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)**. Other election material or voter guides cannot be distributed on parish grounds. This prohibition exists because while other materials might offer information about candidate positions, most sources do not outline positions on the wide range of issues that Catholics are urged to consider before voting. In addition, some organizations that prepare guides may not be 501(c)(3) organizations, and would not be subject to the same rules as the Church and Church-affiliated organizations.

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

Candidates and elected officials can be invited to parishes, as long as IRS rules are followed. 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 is running for office without inviting all other candidates, as long as the purpose is not to promote that individual's candidacy. In these cases, such as if a parish school invites a current State Representative to read to its students, the elected official may not campaign during the 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 the IRS Code and Church guidelines.

"[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

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

While personal endorsements or contributions 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 on behalf of the Church when publicly 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, client or parishioner mailing lists, and paid working time.

What guidelines exist for election material printed 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 IRS 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 institution. Issue or ballot advocacy columns are permissible, especially if MCC has taken a position on the issue.

“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 Catholic organizations post political material on their website or social media pages?

Catholic organizations must be mindful about what they post on their official 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. Catholic organizations who have questions about a particular instance should seek local legal advice.

What is required if a Catholic organization wants to hold a voter registration 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 with the candidates, and no partisan literature may be distributed during the drive. If the Catholic organization is hosting a voter registration drive, they must communicate information about the election date and rules for voting without regard to the voter's political preference. If hosting a get-out-the vote drive and candidate names are mentioned under each office, parishes must list all without any indication of favoritism.

“A political society endures when it seeks, as a vocation, to satisfy common needs by stimulating the growth of all its members, especially those in situations of greater vulnerability or risk.”

Pope Francis,
Address to the U.S.
Congress, 9/24/15

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 are prohibited from making 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.

Helpful

Reminders for Evaluating Political Activity

Do...

- Share Catholic Social Teaching and apply these values to legislation, public issues, and ballot measures.
- Advocate for or against a particular ballot proposal.
- Conduct a non-partisan voter registration or get-out-the vote drive.
- Encourage Catholics to evaluate candidate positions and form their consciences before voting.
- Check with the diocesan attorney if there are questions about appropriate political activity.

Don't...

- Only invite selected candidates to address a church-sponsored group.
- Distribute partisan campaign literature or unapproved election material at the organization.
- Endorse/oppose candidates and political parties while acting as a representative of the Church.
- Use organizational resources to provide support for candidates, political parties, or Political Action Committees (PACs).
- Conduct a voter registration that is slanted toward one candidate or political party.

The 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, MCC, or the USCCB.

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