



POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND ACTIVITIES OF CHURCH ORGANIZATIONS

Diocese of Wilmington

For purposes of quick reference, summarized here is what is allowed and what is prohibited by IRS Regulations as they apply to Church organizations.

WHAT IS ALLOWED

1. Presenting the Church's moral teaching on political responsibility, human rights, social justice and peace.
2. Public discussion of important **moral and social issues**, emphasizing human, religious and ethical dimensions. (Note: The emphasis is on issues, not particular persons!)
3. Advocacy for or against public policy issues or legislative proposals.
4. Encouraging people to inform themselves of current issues, to follow the positions of their elected representatives (do not use names), and to vote and express their views.
5. Impartial and general encouragement of civic duty of parishioners to register and vote.
6. Encouraging individual participation in voter registration efforts, forums, and other individual, non-partisan voter education efforts.

WHAT IS NOT ALLOWED

1. Publishing or distributing campaign literature or personal written statements which support or oppose a candidate for public office. **This includes social media.**
2. Endorsing or opposing a candidate by name or other designation.
3. Parishes, schools, or other Church institutions making financial contributions to or on behalf of candidates.
4. Publishing responses to candidates' questionnaires which are limited to specific issues in which the Church's position is well known.
5. Granting the use of the organization's facilities to one candidate while refusing it to another because of his or her views, or offering preferential rates to one candidate or group as opposed to another.

In the Diocese of Wilmington our policy is not to grant use of any Church facility to any political candidate or candidates. Our rule is more restrictive than what is stated in the Maryland Catholic Conference and the USCCB Guidelines.

6. Publishing candidate questionnaires, interviews, or voting records.
7. Making any oral statements (whether from the pulpit or elsewhere) which infer or indicate that the speaker or the Church would take a position for or against election of a particular candidate for public office.
8. Offering public prayers or petitions at any time, including during Mass, for the election of specific candidates.
9. Parishioner lists may not be provided any political candidate or party.
10. Direct or indirect support for or opposition to a candidate for public office, a select group of candidates, or a political party. A candidate for a given office should not be permitted to address a parish-sponsored event, e.g., communion breakfast, parish committee meeting.

While individual citizens are free to engage fully in *partisan* politics, churches and other institutions that qualify for tax-exempt status under the Internal Revenue Code are not. **The Church and Church organizations may not be involved in partisan politics. Expressions of preference for a political party and of direct or indirect support for or opposition to specific candidates are not permissible.**

Officials and employees of the Church and other tax-exempt organizations, acting in their individual capacities, may participate freely in partisan politics. Such persons should make clear, however, that they are acting in their individual capacities and not as representatives of the Church or any Church organization. **However, it is often difficult for others to distinguish when an official is expressing his/her own personal view or acting as an official of the Church. This is especially true when using social media. Prudence is always called for when using any social media platform. Clergy are to refrain from partisan politics when using social media because it can become a source of divisiveness in parish.**

Advocacy that supports or opposes public policy issues is quite another thing ... and should be encouraged. Such advocacy is not partisan activity. Church organizations may and properly should support public policies and legislative proposals that affirm and promote human rights and oppose policies and proposals that violate them.

PARTISAN CAMPAIGN LITERATURE

A Catholic organization should not distribute or authorize distribution of campaign literature, biased voter education material, etc. through member mailings, during worship services, or by other means, whether by its own employees or representatives or by the representatives of a candidate, political party or PAC. Parking lots deserve special attention, since automobile windshields seem to present irresistible targets for leafleting. Although certain cases relating to leafleting in shopping malls and their parking lots may cause some to argue otherwise, the parking lots of Catholic organizations generally should be considered private property. They are easily distinguishable, in terms of both use and access, from community shopping centers and malls.

USE OF CHURCH FACILITIES

A Parish or Church organization which is tax-exempt is prohibited by the IRS Code from granting the use of its facilities to one candidate while refusing another because of his or her views or offering preferential rates to one candidate or a group as opposed to another. However, in granting the use of facilities for political meetings or political campaign purposes, the pastor or persons in charge of the facility have always had the responsibility to take care that the goals and programs of any individual or group using the facility do not oppose church teaching. Given the confusion that can and does arise in today's political climate, the non-rental of church facilities to any and all candidates for public office and/or political organizations eliminates possible violation of the IRS code. **This is the rule in the Diocese of Wilmington: No Church facility is to be rented or donated to any political candidate.**

VOTER EDUCATION GUIDES

The USCCB General Counsel's Office strongly recommends not using voter education guides prepared by groups outside the Catholic Church.

This was a significant problem in the past with pressure at the parish level for priests to allow distribution of voter guides. Outside voter guides should be approached with extreme caution. The issues covered in these materials may not illustrate the range of issues of importance to the church. In addition, their content, format and presentation may not satisfy the requirements of section 501 (c)(3) that are applicable to Catholic organizations. The USCC General Counsel recommended that each Diocese consider "adopting a policy against distribution of any voter education materials that have not been approved or made available by the Diocese or State Catholic conference." It is the rule of the Diocese of Wilmington that such voter guides may not be distributed or used in any way.

Note: We encourage clergy and laity to review the documents found on the USCCB's website regarding Faithful Citizenship, Formation of Conscience and Political Responsibility Guidelines.