

Guidelines for

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**PASTORS &  
PARISHES**

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on Lobbying and  
Electioneering

## Introduction

Each election offers an opportunity for Catholics to put their faith into action. “In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation... The obligation is rooted in our baptismal commitment to follow Jesus Christ and to bear Christian witness in all we do.” (Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, 2015)

Too often however politics becomes a contest of powerful interests, partisan attacks, sound bites and media hype. The Church calls for a different kind of political engagement that is shaped by moral convictions of a well formed conscience, focused on the dignity of every human being, the pursuit of the common good and the protection of the weak and vulnerable.

The Church’s primary role in the political process is to address political and social questions by helping its members develop a well-formed conscience, providing guidance on the moral dimensions of public debates, and encouraging the faithful to carry out their responsibilities in political life. In fulfilling these responsibilities, the Church’s leaders are to avoid endorsing or opposing candidates or political parties or telling people how to vote.

Candidates and well-intentioned persons representing interest groups and political parties will often seek the Church’s or Church leaders’ involvement. It is often difficult to know just what is appropriate and what is improper, particularly when trying to conform to the legal parameters of churches and individuals who are acting in an official church capacity.

In general, churches and religious organizations may engage in issue related advocacy but may not be involved in partisan political activities, the promotion of particular candidates or election of non-partisan officials. Thus, actions that have the effect of supporting or opposing candidates for elected office or particular political parties are treated differently than are activities directed toward the enactment or defeat of legislation.

This is a highly technical area of law that involves multiple tests and audit guidelines established by the IRS. **When in doubt as to the propriety of any plan or publication obtain the advice of the diocesan lawyer or the Indiana Catholic Conference.** Additional guidance may be found at [www.usccb.org/about/general-counsel/political-activity-guidelines.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/about/general-counsel/political-activity-guidelines.cfm)

These guidelines are offered to encourage the appropriate and vital participation of people of faith in the public life of our state and our nation. Specifically, they have been developed to help pastors and other church leaders understand the proper role of the Church in the election and political process.

## Recommended Church Activity: Issue Based Education and Advocacy

The following political activities, appropriate for church involvement, are encouraged:

1. Publishing and distributing issue related materials without reference to specific candidates or political parties.
2. Voter registration campaigns and “get-out-the-vote” campaigns.
3. Encouraging Catholics, as citizens, to become involved in political activities.
4. Organizing committees for political education/ involvement.
5. Developing a legislative network to review legislative activity and monitor the positions of elected officials. It is advisable that organizations engaging in this activity establish a practice of publishing the ongoing record of public officials and legislative bodies at reasonable intervals, rather than doing so exclusively during an election campaign.
6. Making church facilities available for multi- issue candidate forums, whether hosted by parishes, diocesan groups, or other neutral organizations.
7. Encouraging attendance at public forums.
8. Forming parish committees to help those with disabilities and/or elders to vote (for example, providing rides to the polls or information on absentee voting).
9. Assisting non-English speaking persons to register to vote and to learn about issues and/or providing registration and other materials in their native language.
10. Organizing letter-writing campaigns on legislative issues.
11. Developing special outreach programs to help the disadvantaged in the electoral process.

## Prohibited Church Activity

Diocesan officials and agencies, clergy, religious, parish councils, parish organizations, and other Church affiliates must avoid the following:

1. Endorsing or opposing political candidates or parties, or actively engaging in political campaigns for or against any candidate or party (for example, homily, newsletter, web sites, flyers and so on).
2. Permitting the preparation, collation, or distribution on church premises of any flyers or other printed materials that favor or oppose a candidate or a party.
3. Using diocesan or parish bulletins or web sites to support, promote, endorse, or oppose any particular political party or candidate.
4. Evaluating candidates in writing or in speech. Types of objectionable evaluations include the following:
  - a. Labeling a candidate as “pro-life” or “anti-school choice” removes objectivity by not allowing readers/listeners to evaluate a candidate’s position for themselves.
  - b. Using plus (+) or minus (-) signs to rate candidates implies an endorsement or opposition.
  - c. Rating candidates on a scale of “one to ten,” for example; or otherwise saying, “X is good, Y is better.”
  - d. Issuing “marked” sample ballots that tell people how to vote.
5. Giving church money or any monies arising from church-related sources to candidates for elective office or holders of political office.
6. Using church facilities in any manner that would connote endorsement of a political candidate.
7. Distributing voter education or other campaign materials prepared by any candidate, political party or PAC.
8. Collecting signatures on or encouraging voters to sign petitions to enable any candidate to appear on an election ballot.

## Publication and/or Distribution of Candidates’ Positions

Parishes and other diocesan agencies or organizations must take great care when publishing or distributing materials that attempt to report candidates’ positions on specific issues or their voting records.

1. All surveys or questionnaires of candidates’ positions for state or federal elections must be prepared or approved by the USCCB or ICC if they are distributed on church property (including parking lots).

The following must be true of any survey or questionnaire approved by the ICC:

- a. It must be objectively worded and objectively compiled. (The survey/questionnaire must not make value judgments about the issue or the response but should confine itself to describing the issue or vote in question and the candidate’s position.)
  - b. It must be sent to all candidates and its results must be accurately reported and free of bias.
  - c. It must cover a broad range of issues of interest or concern to the Church.
  - d. It cannot be distributed in the 10 days preceding a primary or general election because this may prevent candidates or parties from responding to inaccuracies or misrepresentations of their positions.
  - e. It cannot be prepared by an organization that supports or opposes a particular candidate or party.
2. Diocesan or parish bulletins, brochures or other publications containing reports of candidates’ positions on issues should point out that the diocese or parish does not endorse candidates and that the material is distributed for the purpose of informing and educating voters.
  3. Those seeking approval of materials prepared by an organization or individual other than the USCCB, ICC or local diocese should submit materials to the ICC at least two weeks prior to the intended date of distribution.

## Publication and/or Distribution of Voter Education Materials

Parishes and other diocesan agencies or organizations must also be careful regarding use of voter education materials prepared or distributed in the context of an election campaign even if they do not mention candidates by name. When used, the communication should identify specific legislation or a specific non-electoral event outside the control of the organization, that the organization hopes to influence.

Whenever possible, materials prepared by the USCCB, the ICC, or the local diocese should be used for voter education efforts. However, since no publication or series will address every issue of interest to Catholic citizens, the use of other materials may be appropriate. Such materials may be used subject to the following guidelines:

1. Prior to being distributed on church property (including parking lots) or used in some other official capacity, all materials designed to educate voters regarding state or national elections must either be:
  - 1) prepared by the USCCB, ICC, or by the local diocese or–
  - 2) approved by the ICC.
2. Materials to educate voters about issues related to municipal or county elections or referenda must be prepared or approved by the local diocese.
3. The materials may not advocate a position that is opposed to one taken by the Holy See, USCCB, ICC, or the diocese.
4. Materials prepared by an organization or individual other than the Holy See, USCCB, ICC or local diocese should be submitted to the ICC for approval at least two weeks prior to the intended date of distribution.

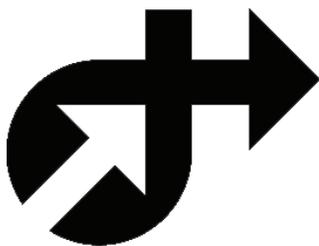
## Diocesan Newspapers, Web Pages and Other Official Communications

In the context of balancing the rights and responsibilities under the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment "freedom of the press" guarantee, diocesan newspapers, web pages, and other official communications tools should note that many of the guidelines are applicable to their activities. Particularly of concern are the guidelines that pertain to publishing and distributing "issue" materials; promoting voter registration and "get-out-the-vote" campaigns; encouraging Catholics as citizens to become involved in political activities; and promoting attendance at public forums. The guidelines that ban endorsing or opposing political candidates or parties are also applicable.

The guidelines pertaining to publishing and/or distributing candidates' positions are applicable to diocesan newspapers, web pages, and other official communications tools whether the polls and summaries of voting records are prepared by the newspapers' own staff or by outside sources.

Nothing in the guidelines is meant to discourage diocesan news personnel from reporting on candidates' election campaigns and publicly stated positions or political views. Also, editorials and syndicated columnists may express subjective opinions or positions on political issues, as long as they do not endorse a particular candidate or political party. In fact, publication of information regarding the candidates and the issues is encouraged to assist subscribers in making informed, responsible choices.

Should diocesan newspapers and official web sites, including parish web pages, wish to pursue political ads or links to campaign or election materials, **further guidance is necessary before taking any action. Please consult with Indiana Catholic Conference or the diocesan attorney to ensure that necessary policies and guidelines are followed.**



### Indiana Catholic Conference

1400 N. Meridian Street  
Indianapolis, IN 46202

317-236-1455 • 317-236-1456 (fax)

Website: [www.indiana.cc.org](http://www.indiana.cc.org) • Email: [icc@archindy.org](mailto:icc@archindy.org)