

2022 Election Year Guidelines for Catholic Parishes and Organizations




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CONFERENCE

Introduction

The Catholic Church calls upon people of faith to share their values in public discussions and to promote actions for the common good. Michigan Catholic Conference (MCC) strongly encourages Catholics to register to vote, become informed on key issues, and participate in elections. However, it is necessary to clarify appropriate political and electoral activity for Catholic entities. This publication is intended to assist Catholic parishes, schools, and other 501(c)(3) organizations that qualify for tax-exempt status under the Internal Revenue Code.

While not intended to be an exhaustive list, this booklet seeks to highlight common questions that may arise during an election year. MCC encourages Catholic organizations to consult with their diocesan attorney if they have any questions. USCCB also offers a useful resource, Political Activities Guidelines, with further information at <https://tinyurl.com/348f8xb6>.





Ballot Question Campaigns

During this current election season, there have been an unusually high number of ballot question campaigns actively collecting petition signatures for various measures that could eventually appear on the November general election ballot. With so many campaigns active, it may be useful to consider the following guidelines for participating in such activities.

In general, parishes and other church organizations can work to support or oppose ballot questions within certain limits, according to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). However, MCC would only advise organizations' participation in statewide ballot question campaigns that MCC either officially supports or opposes. During this election cycle, for instance, MCC supports the Let MI Kids Learn petition drive but is opposed to the Reproductive Freedom For All petition.

Can parishes participate in ballot proposal campaigns?

Yes. Both the Internal Revenue Code and the Michigan Campaign Finance Act permit parish participation in ballot proposal

campaigns. And per the USCCB, Catholic organizations may support or oppose ballot measures without jeopardizing their tax-exempt status.[†]

Are there limits on parish participation in the ballot proposal campaign?

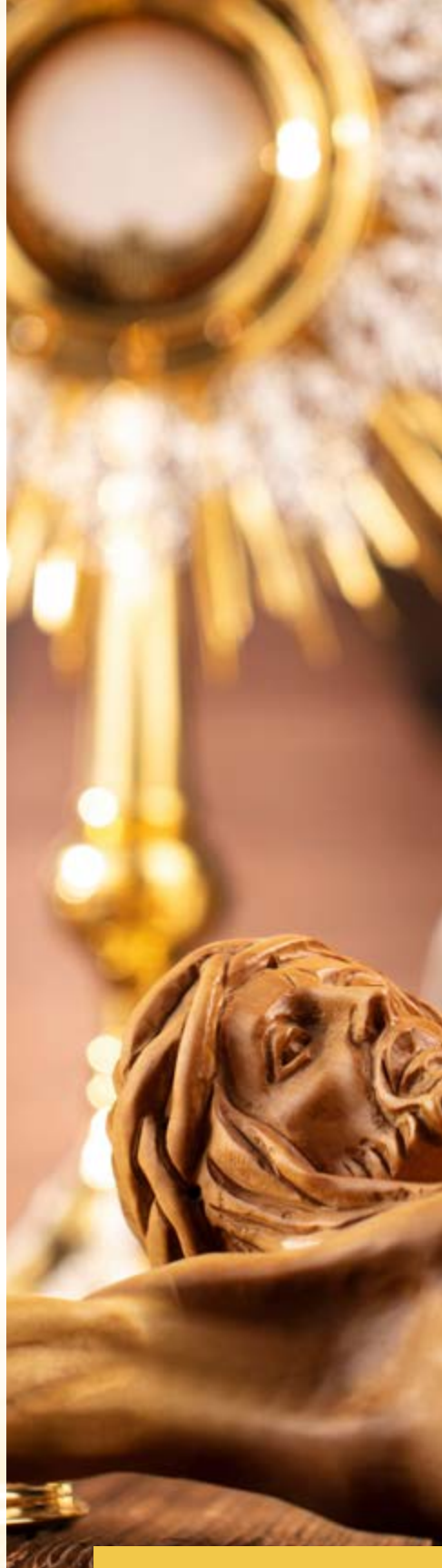
Yes. While state law places no limits on church activity, the Internal Revenue Code requires that church involvement in a ballot issue not exceed an “insubstantial amount” of a church’s total expenditures for religious purposes during the year. Incidental church activity of 1% or less of a church’s total budget should not affect the tax-exempt status of a church.

How can parishes get involved in ballot proposal campaigns?

Any ballot campaign activities that are incidental to the religious objectives of a church are permitted, including:

- Sermons or comments by a pastor or minister during regular church services.
- Statements on the signature drive in church bulletins, newsletters, or websites.
- Mailings to church members regarding the ballot proposal.
- Use of church facilities for meetings.

[†] USCCB Office of General Counsel. *Political Activity and Lobbying Guidelines for Catholic Organizations*, p. 16, <https://tinyurl.com/3bt3jpuf>





General Prohibitions

Because the Church does not and will not engage in partisan activity, parishes and Catholic organizations are prohibited from doing the following:

- Endorsing or opposing individual candidates for political office.
- Making a financial contribution to a partisan campaign or political party.
- Distributing partisan campaign literature under church auspices.
- Arranging for groups to work for a candidate for public office.
- Inviting only selected candidates to address a church-sponsored group.
- Conducting voter registration slanted toward one party.
- Distributing a biased candidate survey.

Prior to Election Day

What issues should the Church encourage Catholics to reflect upon before voting?

The Catholic Church does not support or oppose candidates but instead seeks to focus attention on the moral dimensions of civic issues. USCCB urges Catholics to reflect upon its teaching found in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*. The document encourages Catholics to consider the range of positions important to the Church, to avoid acting as single-issue voters, and to weigh critical issues according to their moral significance. The seven themes of Catholic social teaching are life and dignity of the human person; call to family, community and participation; rights and responsibilities; option for the poor and vulnerable; the dignity of work and the rights of workers; solidarity; and care for God's creation.

Organizations can find the *Faithful Citizenship* document from the USCCB, as well as helpful promotional materials such as videos and bulletin inserts, at faithfulcitizenship.org.





Are pastors and staff allowed to support political candidates?

Individuals cannot be prohibited from endorsing, volunteering for, or donating to candidates in their own personal capacity and time. However, it can be difficult to separate one's personal activity from his or her role as clergy or an employee of the Church. When publicly supporting a candidate, pastors and employees should make it clear that they are not acting or speaking on behalf of the Church.

The organization's facilities or resources — such as but not limited to envelopes, email, parishioner lists, and paid working time — **cannot** be used to benefit a political candidate's campaign.

Can Catholic entities post election-related signs?

Signs endorsing candidates or political parties are prohibited. However, three types of political signs are allowed:

- 1) signs advocating for or against a particular ballot issue, especially those which MCC has taken a public position;
- 2) signs encouraging people register to vote; and
- 3) signs indicating polling place locations on Election Day, such as those that read "vote here."

What voter guides or election-year materials can be distributed?

MCC encourages parishes to share election-year material if it has been published or approved by the diocesan bishop, MCC, or the USCCB.

Items prepared by other sources cannot be distributed by parishes because:

- 1) they do not outline positions on the full range of issues Catholics should consider, and
- 2) some organizations that prepare materials may not be 501(c)(3) entities and are not subject to the same rules that Church and affiliated organizations must follow.

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

Candidates and elected officials can be invited to parishes, provided 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. A parish may invite a current public official who is running for office without inviting all other candidates, provided the purpose is **not** to promote that individual's candidacy. Public officials are able to speak about issues but may never campaign during a visit.

Can the organization host voter registration efforts?

Yes, if the drive is educational and non-partisan. The organization must ensure that any partisan election materials, such as brochures promoting a certain candidate or party, are not distributed. Information about the election date and voting must be consistently shared with participants in the drive, regardless of their political preference. If passing out the names of the candidates running for each office, all must be listed without any indication of favoritism.

Can Catholic organizations post election material on their website or social media?

Catholic organizations must be mindful about what they post on their websites and social media. 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, it should not be posted. Organizations may provide links to candidate websites if all candidates are listed and presented in a neutral way. Institutions wanting clarification about a particular instance should seek local legal advice.

A wooden cross is placed on a piece of crumpled brown paper. Several circular stickers with the text "I VOTED TODAY" are scattered around the cross. The stickers have a red top half with white stars and a blue bottom half with white stars. The text "I VOTED" is in red and "TODAY" is in blue. The background is a light yellow color with a faint, repeating pattern of the "I VOTED TODAY" stickers.

Election Day

If the Catholic entity is a polling location, can campaigns pass out literature there?

Limited campaign literature can be distributed by local volunteers — not staff of the institution — outside the polling place, if all election rules are followed. This distribution should not be linked to the Catholic organization.

After Election Day

Can a parish or Catholic institution share election results?

Information about the results of the election, especially if provided by Michigan Catholic Conference, can be shared if the information does not editorialize about the results or promote a certain official or political party.

Can Catholic entities invite their new elected officials to visit or to an event?

Yes, Catholic entities are encouraged to meet with and to invite their public officials to visit. It is important for these officials to become familiar with the institution and its work — and vice versa — if the visit is non-partisan and consistent with the IRS Code and Church guidelines.





Guidelines on Distributing Election-Related Material

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



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