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# Election & Political Activities Guide

Updated 2016



**FLORIDA CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS**

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## Resource List

### Election and Political Activities Guide

As Catholics, we are called to carry the values of the Gospel and the teachings of our Church into the public square. As citizens of the United States, we have a duty to participate in the framing and the debate of public issues and in the selection of those who occupy positions of civic leadership. These dual responsibilities to faith and citizenship are at the heart of what it means to be a Catholic in a free and democratic nation.

This guide, approved by the bishops of Florida, is intended to encourage Catholic clergy and laity to facilitate the involvement of their faith communities in appropriate election related activities. These activities are designed to increase parishioner interest in the policy issues that will characterize this election year's debate, to focus their attention on candidate positions, and encourage them to exercise their right to vote.

Questions and requests for guidance on these and other election-related issues should be directed to the **Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops, 201 W. Park Avenue, Tallahassee, FL 32301, phone (850) 205-6820 or email [info@flaccb.org](mailto:info@flaccb.org)**.

Updated: April 2016, Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops, Tallahassee, Florida.

**This document may be photocopied and distributed. It is available for printing in English and Spanish on the website of the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops, [www.flaccb.org](http://www.flaccb.org).**

[Address of the Holy Father to the Joint Session of the United States Congress](#), September 24, 2015.

Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops website, [www.flaccb.org](http://www.flaccb.org).

Florida Department of State, Division of Elections website, <http://election.dos.state.fl.us/>.

[Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States with Introductory Note](#), United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2015.

[God is Love \(Deus Caritas Est\)](#), Encyclical Letter of Pope Benedict XVI, 2006.

[Morning Meditation in the Chapel of the Domus Sanctae Marthae, Pray for politicians that they govern us well](#), Pope Francis, September 16, 2013.

[Political Activity and Lobbying Guidelines for Catholic Organizations](#), United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Office of General Counsel, March 1, 2015.

[Vote with an Informed Conscience - General Election, November 4, 2014](#), Statement of the Bishops of Florida, November 2014.

[The Gospel of Life \(Evangelium Vitae\)](#), Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II, 1995.

[The Joy of the Gospel \(Evangelii Gaudium\)](#), Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, 2013.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website, [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org).

# Church Coordination and Communication on Issues Related to the Legislature and State Agencies

The Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops serves as liaison to state government on matters of concern to the Catholic Church in the seven dioceses of the Province of Miami, as a nonpartisan public policy voice on behalf of the Catholic bishops of Florida.

It is the policy of the bishops of Florida that diocesan representatives coordinate with the staff of the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops when communicating with state legislators and agencies, and when participating at local delegation meetings.

In order to assure proper communication and coordination, Conference staff should be apprised in advance of those instances when diocesan representatives are visiting or communicating with state agencies or legislators, whether by phone, in writing or in person in Tallahassee or at a legislator's district office, or at local legislative delegation meetings. In instances when Conference staff does not participate in meetings of this nature, questions and other reactions from legislators or agency officials should be shared with the Conference.

Presenters on behalf of a diocese at local legislative delegation meetings must be retained or employed by the diocese and have approval of the chancellor or the bishop's office in advance of offering any testimony or information. Messages presented should be crafted and coordinated in conjunction with staff of the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops.

***“The Church is engaged in the political process but should not be used. We welcome dialogue with political leaders and candidates; we seek to engage and persuade public officials.”***



***“We cannot compromise basic principles or moral teaching. We are committed to clarity about our moral teaching and to civility.”***

*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States with Introductory Note, 2015, Nos. 59 & 60*

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## The Church's Role in Political Life

Christians believe that Jesus' commandment to love one's neighbor extends beyond individual relationships to all human relations, from the family to the entire community. Jesus brings "good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, new sight to the blind, and to set the downtrodden free" (Luke 4:18). His example and words invite individual acts of charity from each of us. They also encourage understanding and action on a broader scale, one that necessarily involves the institutions and structures of society, the economy and politics.

***"Politics, though often denigrated, remains a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good."***

*Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, no. 205*

There is often confusion and controversy over the meaning of the separation of church and state and the participation of religious groups in political life. Some seek to exclude religious views from public discourse, even labeling them as a threat to equality and liberty. However, genuine religious expression guarantees authentic freedom, nurturing a mutual respect among the members of our society. It is the responsibility of the state to build a just society for its people. The Church, however, plays a role in the promotion and attainment of justice and protection of the common good.

The Church engages in politics and public policy issues in a nonpartisan manner. It is true that IRS regulations require this, but more importantly, no party, or for that matter, no legislator, will consistently espouse and advocate for all of the Church's concerns and priorities. It is counterproductive for the Church to be or even appear to be partisan given the many issues of life and dignity for which it must advocate. If the Church were aligned to one party, it would be unable to speak to the society as a whole. The Church offers a consistent set of principles, and we must be able to profess them to all.

This kind of participation does not involve religious tests for candidates, or telling people for whom they should or should not vote. Rather, the Church joins the public debate to share its experience in serving the powerless and to lift up the moral dimensions of public issues. By advocating its social doctrine through education and rational argument, the Church seeks to properly form the consciences of both those actively involved in political life and the electorate.

## Grassroots Advocacy by Catholic Faithful

Approved by the bishops of Florida, the **Florida Catholic Advocacy Network (FLCAN)** keeps the faithful informed of current legislative issues that relate to the social teachings of the Church and offers an easily accessible channel of communication to assist in sharing concerns with elected officials. Subscribers receive via email:

- timely action alerts urging emails or phone calls to legislators on key proposals at both the state and federal levels;
- sample messages to use in communications with elected officials;
- current legislative reports and summaries during the Florida legislative session;
- bishops statements, position papers, and other educational documents;
- voter education materials;
- information about statewide events and activities; and
- links to helpful resources.

Those who are interested can sign-up by visiting [www.flaccb.org](http://www.flaccb.org). The Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops does not share subscriber information with any other individuals, groups or organizations.

## Catholic Days at the Capitol

Each year, Catholics are invited to Tallahassee during the Regular Florida Legislative Session to participate in Catholic Days at the Capitol. Participants from across the state attend a legislative briefing before scheduled meetings with their elected officials. Included in the activities is a luncheon for Catholic Days participants, Florida's bishops and legislators.

Participants are also invited to attend the annual Red Mass of the Holy Spirit concelebrated by the bishops of Florida. State officials, legislators, judges, attorneys and members of the community gather to pray for divine inspiration and guidance for those serving in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government, and the legal profession in Florida.

Those interested in attending Catholic Days at the Capitol should contact their diocesan coordinator listed on the web site of the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops at [www.flaccb.org](http://www.flaccb.org).

## Issue-Oriented Activities

Advocacy that supports or opposes public policy issues (and not candidates or parties) is encouraged. Such advocacy is not partisan activity. Church organizations may support public policies and legislative proposals that affirm and promote the dignity and rights of the human person and oppose policies and proposals that violate them. Per IRS regulations, such activities must not constitute a substantial part of the organization's overall activity.

The following are examples of acceptable activity:

1. Educational efforts about issues and in support of or opposition to proposed legislation;
2. Encouragement of letter writing campaigns and other contacts with state or federal legislators designed to educate them and to develop support or opposition for proposed legislation;
3. Distribution of fliers containing a statement about issues before the United States Congress or the Florida legislature, and the names and contact information of senators and representatives;
4. Preaching and distribution of information concerning issues dealing with the sanctity of life and the protection of human dignity;
5. Support or opposition for ballot measures, i.e. constitutional amendment initiatives; however, distribution of petitions for placement of an amendment on an election ballot is prohibited unless approved by the bishop in advance.

***“We recognize that the responsibility to make choices in political life rests with each individual in light of a properly formed conscience, and that participation goes well beyond casting a vote in a particular election.”***

*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States with Introductory Note, 2015, No. 7*

## Catholic Faithful in Political Life

To the extent possible given individual circumstances, the faithful are encouraged to play an active role in public life. In doing so, as followers and witnesses to Christ, our actions in the public square must reflect the values of our faith and demonstrate a fundamental belief in the dignity of every person and the sacredness of all human life.

Whether running for office, working for a political party or casting a vote, we are obligated to consult our consciences, shaped by sacred scripture and the teachings of the Church. Catholic Social Teaching is a valuable resource as we equip ourselves with the tools necessary to properly form our consciences in order to address political and social questions and evaluate candidates and their platforms. A well-formed conscience will help guide our decision-making and ensure our actions help build a society that is more respectful of human life and dignity and more cognizant of the Christian obligation to seek peace and justice.

Before participating in election activity, as believers and citizens, we are responsible to:

- become familiar with sacred scripture and the moral and social doctrine of the Church;
- obtain accurate information on issues without relying strictly on party affiliation or campaign advertisements;
- know where candidates stand on key issues and encourage candidates to explain and clarify their positions;
- actively participate in discussions with others, especially our family and those close to us; and
- seek wisdom through prayer and reflection.

***“Sometimes we hear: a good Catholic is not interested in politics. This is not true: good Catholics immerse themselves in politics by offering the best of themselves so that the leader can govern.”***

*Pope Francis, Morning Meditation in the Chapel of the Domus Sanctae Marthae, Pray for politicians that they govern us well, September 16, 2013*

Pope Francis said during his 2015 address to the Joint Session of the United States Congress, “Each son and daughter of a given country has a mission, a personal and social responsibility.” Thus, we are all called to participate in public life and to apply Gospel values to our political activities.

## Guidelines for Parish Involvement

While individual citizens are free to engage fully in *partisan* politics, churches and other 501(c)(3) 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 in opposition to specific candidates or political parties are not permissible.**

The following guidelines are intended to encourage and facilitate appropriate parish and Church-organization participation in political activities:

**Do...**share the Church's teaching on human life, human rights, social justice, the common good and peace.

**Do...**highlight the moral and ethical dimensions of public policy issues.

**Do...**urge parishioners to join the party or campaign of their choice and, in the light of Church teaching, evaluate candidate positions.

**Do...**facilitate voter education through the provision of materials produced or authorized by the local diocesan bishop or the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops (candidate survey responses, election year issue summaries, and voter information).

**Do...**urge parishioners to register and vote.

**Do...**encourage active participation in "get-out-the-vote" campaigns, and other non-partisan voter education initiatives.

**Do...**take care to avoid partisanship. **No diocesan or parish entity or organization shall endorse, oppose or campaign for or against any political party or candidate for public office; nor shall any funds of any such entity or organization be contributed to any political candidate, party or campaign. Judicial retention elections are included under these provisions.**

***"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."***

*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States with Introductory Note, 2015, No. 14*



## Candidate Questionnaire Project (CQP)

The Candidate Questionnaire Project is an effort supported by the bishops of Florida to assist Catholics and the broader community to become informed voters. Being familiar with candidates' positions on issues involving human life and dignity and the common good is essential to responsible, faithful citizenship.

Questions on public policy issues are posed to all congressional, state legislative and gubernatorial candidates in Florida and pertain to issues of concern to the Church that are anticipated to appear before lawmakers in the coming term. A broad range of issues are covered, such as: abortion, embryonic stem cell research, death penalty, marriage, persons with disabilities, education, immigration, conscience protection, religious freedom, alternative energy and nuclear weapons. Congressional and state questions and responses received from candidates are available at [www.flaccb.org](http://www.flaccb.org).

**Materials prepared as part of the Candidate Questionnaire Project are approved by the bishops of Florida for use in parish bulletins or diocesan publications. Surveys or polls by outside organizations are not approved for distribution by Church entities unless prior approval has been granted by the local diocesan bishop or the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops.**

Evaluations of candidates or political parties by Church entities are to be avoided. **Examples of objectionable evaluations are as follows:**

1. Encouraging readers or listeners (e.g. a homily) to vote for or against a particular candidate or party;
2. Labeling a candidate or party as "pro school choice" or "anti-life"; such a practice removes objectivity by not allowing readers to evaluate a candidate's position themselves;
3. Using plus (+) or minus (-) signs or similar markings to evaluate the candidate or party;
4. Rating candidates or parties on a scale of "one to ten" for example, or otherwise saying "X is good", "Y is better"; and
5. Using marked sample ballots.

## Voter Registration

It is permissible to encourage parishioners to embrace their right and duty to share in political life. In order to vote in Florida, you must be a U.S. citizen and a resident of the state who is 18 years of age or older. Florida is a closed primary state. If you wish to vote in a partisan primary election, you must be a registered voter of the party for which the primary is being held.

In the weeks preceding voter registration deadlines, parishes are encouraged to include information about voter registration in their bulletins. A **sample bulletin announcement** follows:

### Use Your Voice and Vote

Parishioners who are not registered to vote for the upcoming elections may do so by visiting the website of the Florida Division of Elections, <http://election.dos.state.fl.us/>. Follow the instructions for completing and mailing a voter registration form. You will receive a voter registration card in the mail to confirm your registration. Follow this same procedure to update your name, address or change your party affiliation.

### Conducting Voter Registration Drives

Conducting voter registration drives requires great care and strict adherence to existing Florida law.

**Parishes wishing to conduct their own voter registration drives should obtain permission from the (arch)diocese** and must register as a Third-Party Voter Registration Organization with the Florida Division of Elections prior to engaging in any activities. Third-Party Voter Registration Organizations that do not comply with all Florida statutory and regulatory requirements may be liable for fines. A parish that only distributes, but does not collect, voter registration applications does not need to register with the Division of Elections. For additional information, see: <http://dos.myflorida.com/elections/>.

A parish may be approached by outside organizations or persons wishing to conduct registration drives on parish property. **Only organizations that are both affiliated with and approved by the diocese may conduct voter registration drives on parish property** (e.g. Knights of Columbus, Council of Catholic Women). It is the responsibility of these organizations, not the parish, to register as a Third-Party Voter Registration Organization and adhere to all requirements of the Division of Elections.

## Endorsements and Electioneering

Pastors and Church leaders **must** avoid endorsements, contributions, electioneering or other political activity when acting in their official capacity. Although personal endorsements are not prohibited, it may be difficult to separate personal activity from one's role as a representative of the Church. Officials and employees of the Church, acting in their individual capacities on political matters, **must** make clear that they are not acting as representatives of the Church or any Church organization.

### Parish Lists, Campaign Materials, Use of Buildings

Parishioner lists should not be provided to any candidate or political party. Church-owned buildings and properties should not be made available to any candidate or party, nor is the distribution of partisan campaign materials through official Church or parish channels permissible. Parish officials should avoid any association with the distribution of partisan campaign materials on Church property, including parking lots.

### Distribution of Voter Education Materials

Pastors and others should be wary of outside organizations seeking to distribute voter education materials through parishes. It may happen that issues covered in outside materials do not address the range of issues of importance to the Church. Moreover, their content, format and presentation may not satisfy IRS regulations applicable to Catholic organizations. Though distribution of these materials elsewhere may have value, they may not be appropriate for distribution in Catholic parishes. **Parishes are not to distribute any materials that are not approved by the local diocesan bishop or the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops, or made available to the diocese through the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)**. Displays of partisanship or partisan activities may not accompany distribution of approved materials.

### Websites, Social Media and Electronic Communications

Many parishes maintain websites and utilize email to communicate with parishioners and the general public. The guidelines set forth here apply equally to websites, social media sites and all electronic communications. Diocesan or parish sites must not link to other online sites that support or oppose candidates or political parties. Consult with your diocesan attorney or the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops before posting any political content or links to political content on web or social media sites.

## Candidate Appearances

### Requests from Candidates to Speak / Appear at Gatherings

In an election year, candidates for public office aggressively seek opportunities to promote their campaigns. Parish gatherings provide especially attractive opportunities for politicians who seek support for their candidacies. These guidelines should be followed:

1. Candidates should never be permitted to speak in connection with Mass or any other religious service. If a candidate seeks to do so, straightforwardly deny permission, citing Internal Revenue Service (IRS) regulations governing political activity of tax-exempt religious organizations. You might also make clear that religious services are inappropriate occasions for partisan politics.
2. A candidate for a given office should not be permitted to address a parish-sponsored event (e.g. communion breakfast, parish committee meeting, etc.), unless all other candidates for that office have been invited to make a presentation at the same event.
3. A parish official may introduce a public office holder to participants in a parish-sponsored event, but not in that person's capacity as a candidate. Thus, a senator or congressman may be recognized as "Senator" or "Representative," but not as a candidate for reelection to the U.S. or Florida Senate or House of Representatives.
4. A public figure or expert who also is a candidate may be allowed to speak in his/her capacity as a public figure or expert without providing equal access to other candidates. However, the following precautions must be taken in order not to violate IRS rules:
  - The person must speak only in his/her capacity as an expert or public figure, no mention may be made of his/her candidacy.
  - No campaign activity may occur in connection with the appearance.
  - All communications, oral or written, should identify the other-than-candidate capacity in which the person is appearing and should not mention his/her candidacy. The IRS has made clear that if the primary purpose of the invitation is to showcase an individual's candidacy, the organization may violate election rules **even if no campaign activity occurs**.
5. When diocesan media are conducting candidate interviews, it is recommended that the interviews of all candidates in a race be published in the same issue or available on the same broadcast.

## Conducting Candidate Forums / Debates / Candidate Nights

Parishes may sponsor public forums, debates and lectures in which candidates explain their views to the public, but there must be no indication of a bias for or against any candidate, party, or position. Since hosting a candidate forum requires careful advance planning, it is recommended that the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops be contacted for assistance prior to scheduling such an event. The Conference has experience with candidate forums and has established relationships with many of the incumbents and other candidates.

Because many candidates represent an area that is larger than the boundaries of one parish, candidate forums are often organized most effectively in cooperation with other groups, such as nearby parishes, diocesan offices, Catholic Charities offices, etc.

When hosting a candidate event, the following guidelines should be followed:

1. Though some may opt not to attend, **all candidates qualified for a particular office are to be invited to participate**, since excluding candidates may evidence bias. However, there are specific circumstances in which candidates may be excluded. For example, a candidate debate during the primary election campaign may be limited to legally qualified candidates seeking the nomination of a particular political party.
2. Discuss the ground rules for the forum early in the process and ensure that all parties involved agree to these. Questions are to be prepared and presented in a non-partisan fashion and cover a broad range of issues.
3. Treat all candidates alike. Give each candidate an equal opportunity to present views on issues discussed. If all candidates appear at the public forum to speak, all candidates may distribute their campaign literature. If all candidates do not appear to speak, no distribution of campaign literature should be permitted.
4. Use an independent nonpartisan panel to prepare and present questions. The moderator may not comment on the questions or imply approval or disapproval of any of the candidates.
5. Screen questions from the audience before they are asked to ensure they follow the guidelines of the forum.
6. Plan your turnout strategy and be realistic about your ability to bring out a crowd so that you don't promise more than you can deliver.