

Pastors, Parishes, and Political Responsibility

Guidelines for permissible political activities by Catholic organizations

In the United States of America, all adult citizens are blessed to have the opportunity to vote for our political leaders. This is not a responsibility to be taken lightly, and the Bishops of New York State call on Catholic citizens to inform their consciences on the critical issues of the day, to learn the positions of candidates for office, and to exercise their right to vote. These issues include, but are not limited to, respect for the sanctity of human life from the moment of conception until natural death, issues of war and peace, religious liberty, the education and formation of children, the needs of the poor, oppressed and vulnerable, and access to health care for all people, particularly the elderly and infirm.

In the document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the Bishops of the United States remind us of the role of the Church in the public square:

The church's obligation to participate in shaping the moral character of society is a requirement of our faith. It is a basic part of the mission we have received from Jesus Christ, who offers a vision of life revealed to us in sacred Scripture and tradition. To echo the teaching of the Second Vatican Council: Christ, the Word made flesh, in showing us the Father's love also shows us what it truly means to be human (see Gaudium et Spes, 22).

In *Faithful Citizenship*, we are reminded of the importance of a well-formed conscience. It is the exercise of conscience, aided by prudential judgment, that assists Catholics in determining effective ways to promote the common good. The U.S. Bishops state:

"Catholic voters should use the framework of Catholic social teaching to examine candidates' positions on issues affecting human life and dignity as well as issues of justice and peace, and they should consider candidates' integrity, philosophy, and performance. It is important for all 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' (Living the Gospel of Life, no. 33)."

Keeping in mind their duty to educate the faithful, the Bishops of New York State join with their brother Bishops throughout the country in urging Catholics to become informed about issues, communicate their positions to elected officials, register to vote, and vote according to conscience. To this end, the New York Bishops created the Catholic Action Network, which serves as an educational arm of the New York State Catholic Conference. The Bishops encourage all Catholic New Yorkers to join the network to remain up to date on important issues involving fundamental issues of justice and respect for the sacredness and dignity of all human life.

Recently, you may have read or heard about changes in IRS policy regarding religious organizations' ability to endorse candidates. While the new policy may have eased restrictions and allow for such political endorsements, the U.S. Bishops nevertheless see the wisdom in voluntarily retaining a policy against endorsing any candidates for office at the local, state or federal level. Therefore, it is the policy in New York State, as in the rest of the country, that **no Catholic Church, school or other ministry will make endorsements of candidates under any circumstances**, even as we publicly agree or disagree with particular policies or statements of those candidates.

We therefore offer the following guidelines to Catholic pastors, parish leaders, and parishioners regarding permissible political activity. Individual bishops may have issued additional guidelines beyond what is listed below. The statewide guidelines do not supersede such local guidelines. We urge pastors to consult with their chancellor for additional guidance.



While the Catholic Church often speaks to issues that are both moral and political, it directs its attention to the issues, not to political parties or candidates.

Despite a change in IRS policy regarding the endorsing of candidates by religious organizations, it is the policy of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Bishops of New York State that participating or intervening in political campaigns on behalf of or in opposition to any candidate for public office by a parish or Church organization is prohibited.

Such prohibition includes engaging in partisan political activities, including raising money for candidates or political parties, making or distributing statements favoring or opposing candidates or parties, running for elected office, or otherwise participating in political campaigns.

However, Church employees and officials (including clergy and religious) acting in their individual capacity as private citizens, may participate freely in the political process, provided they are not acting as representatives of Church organizations or utilizing Church facilities or assets. There may be times when it is difficult to distinguish between activities undertaken as a private citizen and activities undertaken as a Church representative, and prudence should be exercised in this regard.

Church organizations should be particularly cautious when asked to distribute voter education materials prepared by outside organizations. Such organizations may intend to favor or oppose particular candidates, resulting in *de facto* endorsements. We recommend that all voter education materials be reviewed and approved by the diocesan attorney or the New York State Catholic Conference prior to authorization for distribution.

Permissible Church Activities

- Endorsing/opposing legislation, including ballot referenda
- Homilies, bulletin inserts, or electronic communication on moral issues, and on the moral responsibilities of voters
- Providing educational materials on public policy issues, but not candidates, to parishioners
- Arranging for groups to meet with their elected officials to advocate for or against legislation
- Encouraging email-writing, phone calls and other contacts with candidates and elected officials about issues
- Inviting all candidates for public office to a Church-sponsored public forum, debate, or candidates' night
- Conducting a nonpartisan voter registration drive on Church property
- Distributing unbiased candidate questionnaires or voting records on a wide variety of issues

Prohibited Church Activities

- Endorsing/opposing candidates for political office
- Homilies, bulletin inserts or electronic communication regarding specific candidates
- Distributing or permitting distribution of partisan campaign literature under Church auspices or on Church property
- Arranging for groups to work for a candidate for public office
- Funding or financial support of any candidate, political action committee, or political party
- Inviting only selected candidates to address your Church-sponsored group, or permitting/hosting political meetings on Church property
- Conducting voter registration that is slanted toward one party
- Rating candidates numerically, or "favorably" or "unfavorably"
- Sharing parish resources, including mailing lists, with political campaigns or parties

Neither these guidelines nor any other Church document should be used to endorse candidates or otherwise instruct people how to vote on candidates, nor to inhibit Catholics, acting as private citizens, from partisan political activity. Any questions which may arise should be referred to the Chancery Office of your (Arch)Diocese or the New York State Catholic Conference.

Revised and updated September 24, 2025

NEW YORK STATE CATHOLIC CONFERENCE • WWW.NYSCATHOLIC.ORG

ARCHDIOCESE OF NEW YORK • DIOCESE OF ALBANY • DIOCESE OF BROOKLYN • DIOCESE OF BUFFALO
DIOCESE OF OGDENSBURG • DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER • DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE • DIOCESE OF SYRACUSE