

Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Political Activity Guidelines for Catholic Entities in Pennsylvania

Questions often arise when discussing political activity as it relates to Catholic institutions or Catholic organizations. The tradition of the Church is not to tell people for whom to vote, but rather to help the faithful form their consciences through consistent teaching. Further, restrictions that are imposed on political speech in churches are high stakes limitations – possibly resulting in the loss of federal tax exemption. Nevertheless, as Catholics, we are called to be informed and engaged in the political decision-making process.

As the executive director of the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, I know first-hand what an informed and active Catholic citizenry can mean to the advancement of important public policies. Catholics can have a tremendous effect on our culture simply by being registered voters who know the issues, know the candidates, and then vote based on a well-formed and well-informed conscience.

The points below are meant to answer frequently asked questions; however the staff of the PCC is available at 717-238-9613 to answer any further questions you may have. These guidelines are designed to assist Catholics in engaging in important and legitimate political activities while avoiding the pitfalls. They are approved by our legal counsel, Ball, Murren & Connell, so we have their assurances that it is legally sound.

Each diocese may also have prudential policies, over and above what the law requires, which should likewise be observed. These may pertain to the use of diocesan or parish facilities and honoring or extending invitations to public figures or officials. Each diocese's policies should therefore be consulted as well.

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Executive Director, Pennsylvania Catholic Conference

The Basics

As an Internal Revenue Code ("IRC") §501(c)(3) organization, the Church is prohibited by law from participating or intervening in any political campaign on behalf of or in opposition to any candidate for public office. There is no specified safe harbor of permissible intervention; the statutory ban is absolute.

Churches and church organizations may not endorse or state their opposition to political candidates, including the publishing or distribution of materials that favor one candidate over another. Nor may churches or church organizations contribute to political candidates or parties, even in the form of in-kind expenditures such as donations of facilities, supplies, or employee time. Restrictions on political activity apply in equal force to the use of web sites and email as well as to more traditional forums.

Church officials and employees are permitted, however, to instruct the faithful about the Church's teaching on moral and social issues and to identify such issues as important current political topics. Care must be taken, however, not to identify any particular candidate's views as preferable on such issues.

Individuals – whether pastors, officials or employees – may participate in political campaigns so long as they do so in their own name, on their own time and without the use of church resources or facilities.

Candidate Appearances

A political candidate may appear at a church service or function with the following limitations:

- Any other candidate for the office or any other political party, which has nominated a candidate for the office, may not be denied the opportunity to appear at a subsequent service or function.
- No solicitation for funds for a candidate or endorsement of a candidate may be made by the church.
- The church may not indicate bias for or against a particular candidate. There should be no indication at the function of the church's views on any issues being discussed, and no signs or banners displayed by the church in support of or in opposition to a candidate.
- The candidate should be instructed to cover a wide variety of issues of interest to the church members.
- Churches may also sponsor "Candidates' Nights," at which all candidates for a particular office or offices may be requested to attend in the presence of a church-invited audience.

Church Property

A church may allow political candidates or political committees to have meetings or use the facilities of the church on the same basis that it permits civic groups or other non-church organizations to do so. If such organizations are required to pay some rent for using the church property, the political candidate should be charged on the same basis. No favoritism should be shown among candidates in making the facilities available, although some restrictions may be placed on the number attending and on the groups solicited for attendance.

Political signs should not be placed on property owned by Catholic organizations or rented by Catholic organizations for official business. Church halls or schools that are employed as polling places on election day may permit limited campaign leafleting and/or signage according to local election rules but those activities should not be attributed to the Catholic parish or organization.

Church Parking Lot Leafleting

Church parking lots are not public forums as a public street or shopping mall would be and remain dedicated to accommodating the religious activities of the church. If a church grants permission for the distribution of political campaign literature anywhere on its property, it must do likewise for all of the candidates or advocacy groups that wish to do so, without regard to whether the content of the literature is in concert with Church teaching. Churches must avoid complicity in the dissemination of material endorsing or opposing political candidates. Therefore, churches may neither favor nor disfavor any particular group that seeks to distribute materials of that type on portions of its property that are generally accessible to the public.

Churches may, as a policy, refuse to allow parking lot leafleting altogether. At the same time, the law does not impose any obligation on a church to actively monitor and prevent the leafleting of cars parked in its lots.

Candidate Surveys and Voting Guides

The PCC, in cooperation with the dioceses of Pennsylvania, prepares, disseminates, and publishes candidate surveys for state and federal candidates during election cycles. These surveys are drafted based on the public policy priorities established by the bishops of Pennsylvania and adhere to set guidelines. They are reviewed by legal counsel prior to their publication. The PCC encourages Catholic institutions and organizations to use these surveys provided directly by the PCC, by diocesan newspapers, or other diocesan offices. Catholics can be assured that these surveys meet the criteria allowed by law.

Individual Catholics are encouraged to engage in person-to-person networking in all elections by sharing the PCC's election materials or other legitimate Catholic voter guides from outside sources as approved by the PCC and the diocesan Bishop.

These bullet points were meant to answer frequently asked questions regarding political activity. If you have further questions, please contact the PCC at 717-238-9613.