

Guidelines for Pastors and Parishes on Advocacy and Political Participation

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Introduction The Catholic Bishops of Texas recognize the need to distribute guidelines for parishes concerning advocacy and electioneering in election years. The Church speaks often to issues that are both moral and political, but it directs its attention to the issues, not to political parties or candidates.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has addressed this issue:

We bishops have the primary responsibility to hand on the Church's moral and social teaching. Together with priests and deacons, assisted by religious and lay leaders of the Church, we are to teach fundamental moral principles that help Catholics form their consciences correctly, to provide guidance on the moral dimensions of public decisions, and to encourage 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 telling people how to vote.

As Catholics we are not single-issue voters. Our cause is the defense of human life and dignity and the protection of the weak and vulnerable. Catholic voters should use the framework of Catholic 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.

The Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith iterates:

It must be noted also that a well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals. The Christian faith is an integral unity, and thus it is incoherent to isolate some particular element to the detriment of the whole of Catholic doctrine. A political commitment to a single isolated aspect of the Church's social doctrine does not exhaust one's responsibility towards the common good.¹

The Church calls for a different kind of political engagement: one shaped by the moral convictions of wellformed consciences and focused on the dignity of every human being, the pursuit of the common good, and the protection of the weak and the vulnerable.

The Catholic call to faithful citizenship affirms the importance of political participation and insists that public service is a worthy vocation. As Catholics, we should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to a political party or interest group. Decisions about political life are complex and require the exercise of a well-formed conscience aided by prudence. This exercise of conscience begins with outright opposition to laws and other policies that violate human life or weaken its protection. In making these decisions, it is essential for Catholics to be guided by a well-formed conscience that recognizes that all issues do not carry the same moral weight and that the moral obligation to oppose intrinsically evil acts has a special claim on our consciences and our actions. These decisions should take into account a candidate's commitments, character, integrity, and ability to influence a given issue. In the end, this is a decision to be made by each Catholic guided by a conscience formed by Catholic moral teaching.

Building a world of respect for human life and dignity, where justice and peace prevail, requires more than just political commitment. Individuals, families, businesses, community organizations, and government all have a role to play. Catholic teaching challenges voters and candidates, citizens and elected officials, to consider the moral and ethical dimensions of public policy issues. Participation in political life in light of fundamental moral principles is an essential duty for every Catholic and all people of good will.

Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 2007

GUIDELINES

I. Parishes and other institutions may, and in some cases should, engage in issue-oriented activities and advocacy. As a rule, limitations on the extent of such advocacy would not be a problem for parishes or other institutions, since advocacy would not be a substantial part of their endeavors.

The following are examples of such acceptable activity:

- **Educational efforts** about issues and in support or opposition of specific legislation.
- **Encouragement of letter writing campaigns** and other contacts with state or federal legislators designed to educate them and to develop support for legislation.
- **Distribution of flyers** containing a statement about an issue or issues before the Congress or the Texas Legislature, and containing the names and addresses of senators and representatives.
- **Preaching**, with emphasis on deepening the understanding of the sanctity of human life and distribution of pertinent information concerning particular issues, especially those affecting human life.

II. Nonpartisan voter registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns are an allowable activity for parishes and church organizations.

III. Materials prepared for use in educating citizens, including surveys or polls, must emphasize educational objectives not support or opposition to specific candidates or parties. All Materials should be approved by USCCB, TCC, or the local ordinary (Diocesan Bishop).

IV. Evaluations of candidates or political parties should be avoided.

Example of objectionable evaluations would be:

- Those that encourage readers or listeners (e.g., homily) to vote for or against a particular candidate or party;
- Those which label a candidate of party as “pro-school choice” or “anti-life”; such a practice removes objectivity by not allowing readers to evaluate a candidate’s position themselves;
- Those which use plus or minus signs to evaluate the candidate or party;
- Rating Candidates or parties on a scale of “one to ten” for example, or otherwise saying “X is good,” “Y is better”;
- Those which use marked sample ballots.

V. No (arch) diocesan or parish entity or organization should endorse, oppose or campaign for or against any political party or candidate for public office; nor should any funds of any such entity or organization be contributed to any political candidate, party, campaign or political action committee.

VI. Pastors or other religious leaders are urged to avoid endorsements or other political activity, contributions, or electioneering. Although not prohibited, it may be difficult to separate their personal activity from their role as a representative of the Church

VII. Catholic facilities shall not be used for campaign rallies or events. Signs or leaflets supporting a particular candidate should not be located/distributed on Church property.

For complete text of the USCCB office of Government Liaison Political Activity Guidelines for Catholic Organizations, March 15, 2004, go to www.usccb.org/ogc/guidelines.shtml
Question that might arise from these guidelines should be referred to the appropriate office (arch) diocesan or to the Texas Catholic Conference at (512)339-9882 or at TXcatholic.org.

¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life, no. 6.
(Spring 2008)