

Guidelines for Parishes and Agencies on Political Activity

The Washington State Catholic Conference (WSCC) represents the Catholic bishops of Washington State including Archbishop Paul Etienne of the Archdiocese of Seattle, Bishop Joseph Tyson of the Diocese of Yakima, Bishop Thomas Daly of the Diocese of Spokane, and auxiliary bishops of the Archdiocese of Seattle, Bishop Eusebio Elizondo, M.Sp.S. and Bishop Frank Schuster.

“Clergy and lay people have complementary roles in public life. 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, (and) to provide guidance on the moral dimensions of public decisions... In fulfilling these responsibilities, the Church’s leaders avoid endorsing or opposing candidates.”

[Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, 2020, USCCB](#)



The Bishops of the United States in their 2020 document – ***Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States*** – invite individuals and the organizational Church to a ministry that inevitably involves political consequences. This excellent teaching statement, while encouraging political involvement, maintains a distinct role for the Church in the political order, which includes the following:

- Educating its members about the formation of conscience and Catholic moral and social teachings;
- Highlighting the moral dimensions of public policy;
- Participating in debate on matters affecting the common good; and
- Witnessing to the Gospel through the many services and ministries provided by the Catholic community.

The WSCC provides the following guidelines in order to assist parishes and Catholic organizations to determine activities that are permitted during election campaigns and activities that are prohibited. General guidance by topic can be found at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) website. <http://usccb.org/about/general-counsel/political-activity-guidelines.cfm>

WHAT WE CAN DO

Catholic Church and Catholic organization officials can:

1. Make comments and provide moral guidance on public **issues**.
2. Encourage Catholics to vote and to become involved in political activities.
3. Use parish bulletins, websites and social media to publish and distribute materials on public policy **issues** approved by the Washington State Catholic Conference (WSCC).

4. Express the Church's teachings on public policy **issues**.
5. Organize non-partisan voter registration campaigns and "get-out-the-vote" campaigns including information on how to obtain absentee ballots.
6. Organize committees for public policy education/involvement in **issues**.
7. Develop a legislative network to advocate for the Church's public policy agenda.
8. Conduct issue and/or **balanced** candidate forums. Church facilities may be made available for these forums according to diocesan guidelines.
9. Distribute unbiased questionnaires on a wide range of issues provided the structure and content of the material have an educational purpose and have been approved by USCCB or WSSC.
10. Organize visits to the legislature and letter writing campaigns on legislative **issues** and **initiatives** in concert with Catholic Church positions as approved by USCCB or WSSC.
11. Allow organizations the use of parish facilities based on local diocesan policies to discuss **issues** that are in accord with Catholic Church teaching
12. Allow the use of parish facilities for polling places on Election Day.

WHAT WE CANNOT DO

Catholic Church and Catholic organization officials cannot:

1. Endorse or oppose candidates or political parties, or actively engage in political campaigns for or against any candidate or party through homily, newsletter, flyer, poster, bulletin, e-mail, phone, parish website links, social media, or by providing a parish mailing list.
2. Permit the distribution on Church property, including parking lots, of any printed materials, including political signs, placards, or voter guides that favor or oppose a candidate or promote the agenda of a political party.
3. Permit the distribution of election materials or voter education materials, which relate to **issues** that have **not** been authorized by USCCB or WSSC.
4. Use Church bulletins, websites or social media to promote candidates through announcement or advertising.
5. Evaluate candidates in writing or in speech. Types of objectionable evaluations include:
 - A. Labeling a candidate, e.g. "pro-life" or "pro-choice."
 - B. Comparing or rating candidates, e.g. using a scale of plus (+) or minus (-) or otherwise saying "X is right", "Y is wrong."
 - C. Issuing any "marked" sample ballots that tell people how to vote.
6. Give Church money, in-kind services, or any funds arising from Church related sources to candidates for political office or holders of political office or political parties.
7. Allow the renting or donating of parish or diocesan facilities, including parish halls, school gyms and auditoriums, to candidates or political parties for **partisan** activities, such as party conventions, caucuses, candidate promotional events, etc. However, at times other than during an election campaign, facilities may be used to hold public informational forums presented by elected officials. On these occasions, all use and rental arrangements must be in conformity with diocesan property policies, including provisions for adequate insurance coverage.

No distribution of any political material is permitted unless it is authorized by the diocesan bishop, the WSSC, or USCCB.

CHURCH LEADERS

Limitations on partisan political activity apply to organizations and persons acting in an official role as Church leaders (bishops, clergy, pastoral religious leaders, religious, diocesan agency directors, etc.). Pastors and parish leaders must be especially careful **not** to use their *position* to promote candidates. Inappropriate promotion would include:

- Commenting on candidates from the pulpit, including introductions as members of the parish during an election campaign.
- Allowing your name **with** title and/or canonical office to be used on candidate campaign literature.
- Permitting the use of Church stationery, phones, e-mail or social media to promote candidates.

Diocesan, parish and Catholic organizational leaders acting as private citizens have a First Amendment right to support or oppose political candidates or parties provided they do not in any way utilize the Church's or Catholic organization's name, title *and/or canonical office*, financial resources, facilities or personnel. With these restrictions, if leaders choose to be involved in partisan activities, they must clearly and unambiguously indicate that the actions or statements they make are their own and not those of the Church or of the Catholic organization.

INITIATIVES AND REFERENDUMS

The Washington State Catholic Conference reviews all proposed initiatives and referendums. After appropriate consultation with the bishops, WSCC supports, opposes or takes no position on each measure that will appear on the ballot.

Given the popularity of the initiative process in Washington State, individuals and groups may want to gather signatures on Church property or at Church activities:

- The gathering of signatures is **not** permitted unless specifically authorized by WSCC.
- When neither the WSCC nor the diocese has taken a public position on a specific initiative or referendum, granting the use of Church facilities to groups either supporting or opposing the issue is not allowed.

The WSCC should be consulted for background information on public policy issues.

USE OF PARISH PROPERTY

Many individuals and organizations seek support from Catholic parishes and individual Catholics for their **issues**. Some may want to distribute information to parishioners or place flyers on cars in parish parking lots. Washington State Supreme Court rulings hold that free speech rights do not give individuals or organizations the right to distribute information on church property against the desires of the parish.

Pastors and parish leaders appointed by the bishop have the right to prohibit the following activities on parish property:

- Distributing information to parishioners

- Gathering signatures for petitions
- Placing leaflets on car windshields in parish parking lots
- Placing political signs or placards on Church property

If permission is granted for any of the above activities, it must be subject to the restrictions on political activity described in the section titled "WHAT WE CANNOT DO."

The WSCC is available to address any questions regarding political activity:

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The Catholic Church is committed to the value of being non-partisan. In addition, the Church and its many organizations maintain a tax-exempt status under 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Tax Code which dictates the political activities that a 501(c)(3) organization can and cannot do. These guidelines were developed in consultation with the General Counsel of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and attorneys for the dioceses in Washington State.