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Guidelines on Political Activities for Parishes and Catholic Church Organizations

Formed in 1969 by the Roman Catholic Bishops of Illinois, the Catholic Conference of Illinois (CCI) is the agent through which the dioceses of Illinois (Belleville, Chicago, Joliet, Peoria, Rockford, and Springfield) may act mutually and cooperatively in matters of interdiocesan and state-wide interest. CCI is a multi-issue public policy arm of the Church in Illinois.

Role of the Church in Politics

The Catholic Church, its parishes and Church organizations are prohibited by federal law from participating in partisan political activities. This prohibition is absolute. The tax-exempt status of a parish or Church organization may be revoked if there is a violation of the law, and other penalties and taxes may also be imposed on any funds spent on prohibited political activities.

However, the Church does have a role in politics and public policy formation through activities such as:

- Educating Catholics and others on the teachings of the Church as they relate to social policies.
- Analyzing and measuring policies against the values of the Gospel.
- Speaking out on issues, such as those involving the life and dignity of the human person, social justice, the promotion of the common good, and the life of the Church in society.
- Encouraging voters to participate fully in the political process.

The following is a guide to some of the political activities in which parishes and Church organizations can and cannot be engaged, in compliance with applicable federal law. Please note that this is only a general guide to political activities and is not to be construed as legal advice. If you have particular concerns or questions, please consult with your individual diocese or contact the Catholic Conference of Illinois.

Clearly Prohibited Activities

Among the activities that parishes and Church organizations are clearly prohibited from participating in include:

- Endorsing a candidate or political party.

- Donating money or other resources to a candidate or political party.
- Exclusively offering the parish's or Church organization's facilities to a candidate or political party.

Voter Registration Drives

- Nonpartisan voter registration and "Get out the vote" drives are permissible.
- The event should not demonstrate a preference or bias toward a particular candidate, political party, or voting position.
- No election campaign materials or other materials produced by candidates or political parties are to be distributed, and the event should not be conducted in cooperation with any political campaign or party.
- The event should be open to everyone and not targeted to individuals known to support a particular candidate.

Issue Advocacy Campaigns

- Issue advocacy campaigns can be conducted, including educational efforts about issues and legislation and the encouragement of letter writing campaigns and other contacts with government officials, as long as the campaign is conducted in a nonpartisan manner.
- The position taken on an issue must be consistent with the Church's position and Catholic Social Teaching.
- When issue advocacy campaigns coincide with election campaigns, an individual candidate's position on the issue should not be identified nor compared with the Church's position on that issue.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Catholic Social Teaching should be the framework from which we address issues in the political arena. Catholic Social Teaching includes the following major themes:

- Life and Dignity of the Human Person
- Protection of and Participation in the Family and the Community
- Rights of the Human Person Protected and Each Person's Responsibilities Met
- Care for the Poor and Vulnerable
- Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers
- Solidarity as One Human Family
- Care for God's Creation

Voter Guides

(Candidate surveys and voting record guides)

- Candidate surveys can be prepared and distributed but must cover a wide range of issues.
- All candidates in the particular election covered by the survey must be invited to complete the survey.
- Questions must be asked in an open-ended, unbiased way.
- A candidate's responses should be reported accurately and in their entirety, without editorial comment, and are not to be compared with the Church's positions.
- Voting record guides may also be distributed and should include the voting records of all the members of the legislative body. However, those legislators who are candidates for re-election are not to be identified as candidates.
- The reported votes are to be selected and presented in an unbiased manner, must cover a wide range of issues, and are to be reported without any editorial comment or compared to the Church's positions on the issues.

*Any voter guide should include a disclaimer that it is for educational purposes only and not intended as an endorsement of or to indicate opposition to any particular candidate or political party.

**Parishes and Church organizations often have the most difficulty in dealing with the distribution by outside organizations of voter guides that are biased. Such biased voter guides should NOT be distributed. Often, a legal opinion stating that distribution of such materials is permissible may be provided, but such opinions are not reliable. Outside organizations requesting permission to distribute voter guides should be told that they must have materials reviewed by your individual diocese or the Catholic Conference of Illinois.

Voter Education Forums

- Unbiased voter education forums at which candidates may appear can be sponsored by a parish or Church organization.
- All bona fide candidates for the particular office covered by the forum must be invited to participate.
- Questions should be prepared and asked by an independent nonpartisan panel, and must be asked in an open-ended, unbiased manner.
- A wide range of issues should be discussed.
- Each candidate must have an equal opportunity to express his or her view on each issue.
- The moderator of the forum must not make any comment implying his or her approval or disapproval of a candidate.

Distribution of Campaign Materials on the Property of a Parish or Church Organization

- Parishes and Church organizations should avoid any participation in or authorization of the distribution of campaign literature or biased voter education materials on their property. However, a parish or Church organization is not obligated to actively monitor and prevent campaign leafleting of cars in its parking lot.

- Political signs should not be placed on property owned or rented for official business by a parish or Church organization.

Further guidance on political activities can be found on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website at www.usccb.org/ogc/guidelines.shtml.