



POLITICAL ACTIVITY GUIDELINES

For Parish and Church Organizations

HOW DOES THE CHURCH INFLUENCE PUBLIC POLICY?

When justice and the common good requires it, the Church expresses its official position on select public policy matters through the Minnesota Catholic Conference (MCC). The Catholic bishops of Minnesota are the “conference” and guide the work of MCC staff; the bishops also visit with elected officials to communicate their public policy concerns. MCC staff lobby and advocate on behalf of the bishops on issues of concern to the Church. In addition, MCC staff provides resources to help faithful citizens engage their legislators to promote the common good.

The bishops, together with priests and deacons, and assisted by religious and lay leaders of the Church:

- teach fundamental moral principles that help Catholics form their consciences correctly
- provide guidance on the moral dimensions of public decisions
- encourage the faithful to carry out their responsibilities in political life

Often, this entails offering educational and catechetical programming in parishes. In doing so, **Catholic leaders, parishes, and organizations must avoid partisan political campaign activity so to not endanger the Church’s tax-exempt status.**

Furthermore, this limitation on her public expression—one that is also self-imposed—is guided by prudence. **The Church seeks to be principled, never partisan, to offer a more credible witness of the Gospel to a wider audience in the community.**



WHY IS SOME POLITICAL ACTIVITY PROHIBITED?

Because of its tax-exempt status, the Church, including parishes and ministries, are subject to rules regarding political activity. **Any individual or group acting in an official Church capacity must conform to laws and regulations that govern tax-exempt organizations.**

Although the Church may engage in a wide array of educational programming related to public policy questions, including issue-related advocacy activity, **it may not be involved in partisan political candidate or campaign activities**, including making endorsements of candidates or political parties, or using Church funds to support candidates.

If a parish or religious organization violates the law, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) may revoke the parish or organization’s tax-exempt status temporarily or permanently. The IRS also may assess additional penalties and taxes on any funds that they believe the Church, parish, or Church organization spent on prohibited political activities.

The IRS provides extensive guidance on its website (<https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p1828.pdf>), including practical examples for parishes and religious organizations that wish to avoid prohibited activities.



For more election-related resources, visit mncatholic.org/election2025

To join the Catholic Advocacy Network, scan the QR code.



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WHAT ACTIVITY IS PERMITTED?

The Church has a right and responsibility to weigh in on public issues. As Catholics, we are called to work for policies that protect the poor and vulnerable and uphold life at all stages. To that end, **parishes and religious organizations can participate in the following types of political activities:**

- Advocacy for or against ballot initiatives such as constitutional amendments
- Advocacy for or against specific local, state, and federal legislation, such as responding to an email from the Catholic Advocacy Network (CAN)
- Distributing materials related to specific issues that do not reference candidates or parties
- Participating in non-partisan voter registration efforts or get-out-the-vote drives
- Organizing issue-specific letter-writing campaigns or lobby day events
- Sponsoring public voter education forums on specific issues; including candidate forums

ISSUE ADVOCACY VS. POLITICAL CAMPAIGN INTERVENTION

According to the Revenue Ruling, “Section 501(c)(3) organizations may take positions on public policy issues, including issues that divide candidates in an election for public office.” However, the IRS cautions that issue advocacy can turn into prohibited campaign intervention if the message favors or opposes a candidate. Candidates can be identified by name or by reference. In the end, the IRS notes it will consider “all the facts and circumstances” to determine “if the advocacy is political campaign intervention.”

A warning states that an issue advocacy communication “is particularly at risk of political campaign intervention when it makes reference to candidates or voting in a specific upcoming election.”

WHAT ACTIVITY IS PROHIBITED?

The guiding principle for parishes is that they may not intervene in political candidate campaigns. Therefore, **any partisan political or electioneering activity is prohibited.**

A common concern that arises during political campaigns is the distribution of voter information materials prepared by outside groups. Catholic organizations should be wary of outside groups seeking to distribute voter education or election-related materials on Church property or at official Church functions. Often, the groups preparing these materials are not subject to the same restrictions as the Church. **Therefore, any materials not approved by the Minnesota Catholic Conference or your diocese should not be distributed.**

The Church and her parishes and ministry organizations are also prohibited from, among other things, the following types of activities:

- Endorsing or opposing candidates for elected office
- Preparing or distributing campaign literature or materials that favor or oppose a specific candidate or political party
- Using diocesan or parish bulletins and websites to support, promote, endorse, or oppose any political party or candidate
- Giving Church money or support to candidates for political office or to officeholders

The IRS lists seven factors that determine whether issue advocacy results in partisan intervention in an election:

- one or more candidates for public office is identified
- the statement is made close to election day
- there is or is not a reference to an upcoming election or voting
- the issue “has been raised as an issue distinguishing candidates for a given office”
- the communication “is part of an ongoing series of communications by the organization on the same issue that are made independent of the timing of the election”
- the timing is “related to a non-electoral event”

This information is intended to provide general guidance only. Contact your diocesan attorney with specific questions or concerns. More extensive information including hypothetical fact patterns on a variety of related issues is also available from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Office of General Counsel.