WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

# Guidelines for Church Involvement in Electoral Politics

**(Condensed Version)**

The Wisconsin Catholic Conference, which is the public policy arm of the state's Roman Catholic bishops, first issued the *Guidelines for Church Involvement in Electoral Politics* in 1983. The *Guidelines* are intended to encourage Catholics and other citizens to become involved in election campaigns and the discussion of public policy issues. In addition, they clarify what activities and efforts are appropriate for Church officials and agencies during a political campaign.

Copies of the full version of the *Guidelines* may be obtained by contacting the **Wisconsin Catholic Conference,** 131 W. Wilson St., Suite 1105, Madison, Wl 53703, Phone: 608-257-0004, Web: www.wisconsincatholic.org.

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**The Church's Role in Politics**

The Church has both a duty and a right to call attention to the moral and religious dimensions of public issues. As it does this, it applies Gospel values as a norm against which social policies and political activities are measured. It also shares its vision of how our call as believing Christians compels us to work for the transformation of society in ways that make it more just. In specific terms this means the Church and its people can do several things:

- Educate Catholics and others regarding the teachings of the Church and the responsibilities of its members;
- Analyze issues for their moral and social dimensions;
- Measure policies against the values of the Gospel;
- Participate with other citizens in the debate over public policies; and,
- Speak out with courage, skill, and concern on issues involving human rights, social justice, and the life of the Church in society.

**Mission of the Church is Religious, Not Political**

For reasons that are both theological and legal, the Church's involvement in public life does not extend to endorsing candidates for election to public office nor calling for their defeat.

**Recommended Church Activities**

1. Publish and distribute issue materials without reference to specific candidates or political parties.
2. Voter registration campaigns and "get-out-the-vote" campaigns.
3. Encourage Catholics, as citizens, to become involved in political activities.
4. Organize committees for political education.
5. Develop legislative networks to review legislative activity and monitor the positions of elected officials. Such monitoring should be ongoing and not limited exclusively to an election campaign.
6. Make Church facilities available for multi-issue candidate forums whether hosted by parishes, diocesan groups, or other neutral organizations.
7. Encourage attendance at public forums.
8. Develop parish committees to help those with disabilities and/or elders to vote (e.g., rides to the polls, information on absentee voting).
9. Assist non-English speaking persons to register to vote and to learn about issues; provide registration and other materials in their native language.
10. Organize letter-writing campaigns on legislative issues.
11. Develop special outreach programs to help the disadvantaged in the electoral process.

**Partisan Political Activities Not Allowed**

The following activities are not recommended for persons acting in an official Church capacity (i.e. diocesan officials and agencies, clergy, religious, parish councils, parish organizations, and other Church affiliates).

1. Endorsing or opposing political candidates or parties, or actively engaging in political campaigns for or against any candidate or party (e.g., homily, newsletter, etc.).
2. Permitting the preparation, collation, or distribution on church premises of any flyers or other printed materials that favor or oppose a candidate or a party.
3. Using diocesan or parish bulletins or web sites to support, promote, endorse, or oppose any particular political party or candidate.
4. Evaluating candidates in writing or in speech. Types of objectionable evaluations include the following:

    - Labeling a candidate in a manner that removes objectivity by not allowing readers/listeners to evaluate a candidate's position for themselves, such as "pro-life" or "anti-school aid."

- Using plus (+) or minus (-) signs to rate a candidate, which implies an endorsement or opposition.
- Rating candidates on a scale of "one to ten," for example; or otherwise saying, "X is good, Y is better."
- Issuing "marked" sample ballots that tell people how to vote.

5. Giving Church money or any monies arising from Church-related sources to candidates for political office or holders of political office.
6. Using Church facilities in any manner that would connote endorsement of a political candidate.

**Publishing or Distributing Candidates' Positions**

Parishes and other diocesan agencies or organizations must take great care when publishing or distributing materials that attempt to report candidates' voting positions on specific issues or their voting records.

1. All surveys or questionnaires of candidates' positions for state or federal elections must be prepared or approved by the USCCB or the WCC if they are distributed on church property (including parking lots).

   The following must be true of any survey or questionnaire approved by the WCC:

   - It must be objectively worded and objectively compiled. (The survey/questionnaire must not make value judgments about the issue or the response, but should confine itself to describing the issue or vote in question and the candidate's position.)
   - Its results must be accurately reported and free of bias.
   - It must cover a broad range of issues of interest or concern to the Church.
   - It cannot be distributed in the 10 days preceding a primary or general election because this may prevent candidates or parties from responding to inaccuracies or misrepresentations of their positions.
   - It cannot be prepared by an organization that supports or opposes a particular candidate or party.

2. Diocesan or parish bulletins, brochures, or other publications containing reports of candidates' positions on these issues should point out that the diocese or parish does not endorse candidates and that the material is distributed to inform and educate voters.
3. Those seeking approval of materials prepared by an organization or individual other than the USCCB, WCC, or local diocese should submit materials to the WCC at least two weeks prior to the intended date of distribution.
4. It is advisable that organizations engaging in this activity establish a practice of publishing the ongoing record of public officials and legislative bodies at regular intervals, rather than doing so exclusively during an election campaign.

**Publishing or Distributing Voter Education Materials**

Parishes and other diocesan agencies or organizations must also be careful regarding use of voter education materials prepared or distributed in the context of an election campaign, even if they do not mention candidates by name.

Whenever possible, materials prepared by the USCCB, WCC, or the local diocese should be used for voter education efforts. However, since no publication or series will address every issue of interest to Catholic citizens, the use of other materials may be appropriate. Such materials may be used subject to the following guidelines:

1. Prior to being distributed on church property (including parking lots) or used in some other official capacity, all materials designed to educate voters regarding state or national elections must either be 1) prepared by the Holy See, USCCB, WCC, or by the local diocese, or 2) approved by the WCC.
2. Materials to educate voters about issues related to municipal or county elections or referenda must be prepared or approved by the local diocese.
3. The materials may not advocate a position that is opposed to one taken by the Holy See, USCCB, WCC, or the diocese.
4. Materials prepared by an organization or individual other than the Holy See, USCCB, WCC, or local diocese should be submitted to the WCC for approval at least two weeks prior to the intended date of distribution.

**Publishing or Distributing Public Policy Materials**

Even outside of elections, parishes must ensure that bulletin inserts or other materials in the parish that involve public policy matters do not support a position in contradiction with the published position of the Holy See, USCCB, WCC, or the diocese. If in doubt, a determination will be made by the diocese, which may consult with the Holy See, USCCB, or WCC, as necessary.