

# FLORIDA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE



## Election and Political Activities Guide

*Updated for the 2012 Elections*

Archdiocese of Miami

Diocese of St. Augustine

Diocese of St. Petersburg

Diocese of Orlando

Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee

Diocese of Palm Beach

Diocese of Venice

*The Florida Catholic Conference serves as liaison to state government on matters of concern to the Catholic Church in the seven dioceses of the Province of Miami, as a nonpartisan public policy voice on behalf of the Catholic Bishops of Florida.*

## **2012 Election and Political Activities Guide**

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As Catholics, we are called to carry the values of the Gospel and the teachings of our Church into the public square. As citizens of the United States, we have a duty to participate in the framing and the debate of public issues and in the selection of those who occupy positions of civic leadership. These dual responsibilities to faith and citizenship are at the heart of what it means to be a Catholic in a free and democratic nation.

This guide, approved by the bishops of Florida, is intended to encourage Catholic clergy and laity to facilitate the involvement of their faith communities in appropriate election related activities. These activities are designed to increase parishioner interest in the policy issues that will characterize this election year's debate, to focus their attention on candidate positions, and encourage them to exercise their right to vote.

Questions and requests for guidance on these and other election-related issues should be directed to the **Florida Catholic Conference, 201 W. Park Avenue, Tallahassee, FL 32301-7760, phone (850) 205-6820 or email [flacathconf@flacathconf.org](mailto:flacathconf@flacathconf.org).**

December 2011. Florida Catholic Conference, Tallahassee, Florida.

**This document may be photocopied and distributed. It is available for printing at the website of the Florida Catholic Conference, [www.flacathconf.org](http://www.flacathconf.org).**

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## The Church's Role in Political Life

Christians believe that Jesus' commandment to love one's neighbor extends beyond individual relationships to all human relations, from the family to the entire community. Jesus brings "good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, new sight to the blind, and to set the downtrodden free" (Luke 4:18). His example and words invite individual acts of charity from each of us. They also encourage understanding and action on a broader scale, one that necessarily involves the institutions and structures of society, the economy and politics.

*"The Church is duty-bound to offer, through the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically."*

(Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 28a)

There is often confusion and controversy over the meaning of the separation of church and state and the participation of religious groups in political life. Some seek to exclude religious views from public discourse, even labeling them as a threat to equality and liberty. However, genuine religious expression guarantees authentic freedom, nurturing a mutual respect among the members of our society. It is the responsibility of the state to build a just society for its people. The Church, however, plays a role in the promotion and attainment of justice and protection of the common good.

The Church engages in politics and public policy issues in a nonpartisan manner. It is true that IRS regulations require this, but more importantly, no party, or for that matter, no legislator, will always fully agree with the Church and the principles it espouses. It is counterproductive for the Church to be or even appear to be partisan given the many issues of life and dignity for which it must advocate. If the Church were aligned to one party, it would be unable to speak to the society as a whole. The Church offers a consistent set of principles, and we must be able to profess them to all.

This kind of participation does not involve religious tests for candidates, or telling people for whom they should or should not vote. Rather, the Church joins the public debate to share its experience in serving the powerless and to lift up the moral dimensions of public issues. By advocating its social doctrine through education and rational argument, the Church seeks to properly form the consciences of both those actively involved in political life and the electorate.

## Catholic Faithful in Political Life

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To the extent possible given individual circumstances, the faithful are encouraged to play an active role in public life. In doing so, as followers and witnesses to Christ, our actions in the public square must reflect the values of our faith and demonstrate a fundamental belief in the dignity of every person and the sacredness of all human life.

Whether running for office, working for a political party or casting a vote, we are obligated to consult our consciences, shaped by sacred scripture and the teachings of the Church. Catholic Social Teaching is a valuable resource as we equip ourselves with the tools necessary to properly form our consciences in order to address political and social questions and evaluate candidates and their platforms. A well-formed conscience will help guide our decision-making and ensure our actions help build a society that is more respectful of human life and dignity and more cognizant of the Christian obligation to seek peace and justice.

Before participating in election activity, as believers and citizens, we are responsible to:

- become familiar with sacred scripture and the moral and social doctrine of the Church;
- obtain accurate information on issues without relying strictly on party affiliation or campaign advertisements;
- consult the Candidate Questionnaire Project offered by the Florida Catholic Conference and encourage candidates to clarify their positions on key issues;
- actively participate in discussions with others, especially our family and those close to us; and
- seek wisdom through prayer and reflection.

***“Participation in political life  
in light of fundamental moral principles  
is an essential duty for every Catholic  
and all people of good will.”***

(Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States)

Pope Benedict XVI said during his 2008 visit to the United States, “In this land of religious liberty, Catholics found freedom not only to practice their faith, but also to participate fully in civic life, bringing their deepest moral convictions to the public square and cooperating with their neighbors in shaping a vibrant, democratic society.” To continue this tradition, each of us is called to participate in public life and to apply Gospel values to our political activities.

## **Guidelines for Parish Involvement**

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While individual citizens are free to engage fully in *partisan* politics, churches and other 501(c)(3) institutions that qualify for tax-exempt status under the Internal Revenue Code are not. **The Church and Church organizations may not be involved in partisan politics. Expressions of preference for a political party and of direct or indirect support for or in opposition to specific candidates or political parties are not permissible.**

The following guidelines are intended to encourage and facilitate appropriate parish and Church-organization participation in political activities:

**Do...**share the Church's teaching on human life, human rights, social justice, the common good and peace.

**Do...**highlight the moral and ethical dimensions of public policy issues.

**Do...**urge parishioners to join the party or campaign of their choice and, in the light of Church teaching, evaluate candidate positions.

**Do...**facilitate voter education through the provision of materials produced or authorized by the local diocesan bishop or the Florida Catholic Conference (candidate survey responses, election year issue summaries, and voter information).

**Do...**urge parishioners to register and vote.

**Do...**encourage active participation in "get-out-the-vote" campaigns, and other non-partisan voter education initiatives.

**Do...**take care to avoid partisanship. No diocesan or parish entity or organization shall endorse, oppose or campaign for or against any political party or candidate for public office; nor shall any funds of any such entity or organization be contributed to any political candidate, party or campaign. Judicial retention elections are included under these provisions.

## **Parish Lists, Campaign Materials, Use of Buildings**

Parishioner lists should not be provided to any candidate or political party. Church-owned buildings and properties should not be made available to any candidate or party, nor is the distribution of partisan campaign materials through official Church or parish channels permissible. Parish officials should avoid any association with the distribution of partisan campaign materials on Church-owned parking lots.

## **Endorsements and Electioneering**

Pastors and Church leaders **must** avoid endorsements, contributions, electioneering or other political activity when acting in their official capacity. Although personal endorsements are not prohibited, it may be difficult to separate personal activity from one's role as a representative of the Church. Officials and employees of the Church, acting in their individual capacities on political matters, **must** make clear that they are not acting as representatives of the Church or any Church organization.

## **Outside Organizations**

Pastors and others should be wary of outside organizations seeking to distribute voter education materials through parishes. It may happen that issues covered in outside materials do not address the range of issues of importance to the Church. Moreover, their content, format and presentation may not satisfy IRS regulations applicable to Catholic organizations. Though distribution of these materials elsewhere may have value, they may not be appropriate for distribution in Catholic parishes. **Parishes are not to distribute any materials that are not approved by the local diocesan bishop or the Florida Catholic Conference, or made available to the diocese through the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).**

## **Websites and Electronic Communications**

Many parishes maintain websites and utilize email to communicate with parishioners and the general public. The guidelines set forth here apply equally to websites, social networking sites and electronic communications. Diocesan or parish sites must not link to other websites that support or oppose candidates or political parties. Consult with your diocesan attorney or the Florida Catholic Conference before placing any political content or links to political content on sites.

## Voter Registration

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In order to vote in a Florida election, a Florida citizen who is 18 years of age or older must be registered at least 29 days prior to the election in which he or she wishes to vote. Florida is a closed primary state. If you wish to vote in a partisan primary election, you must be a registered voter of the party for which the primary is being held. All registered voters, regardless of party affiliation, can vote on issues and non-partisan candidates.

The **PRESIDENTIAL PREFERENCE PRIMARY ELECTION** will be held on **TUESDAY, JANUARY 31, 2012**. The **PRIMARY ELECTION** for state and federal candidates will occur on **TUESDAY, AUGUST 14, 2012**. The **GENERAL ELECTION** will occur on **TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 2012**. The deadline for registering to vote in the Presidential Preference Primary is January 3, 2012. The registration deadline for the Primary Election is July 16, 2012 and for the General Election, October 9, 2012 .

Early voting begins 10 days before an election and ends on the 3rd day before any election in which there is a state or federal race. For information on dates, times and locations of early voting in your county, please contact your county supervisor of elections.

It is permissible to encourage parishioners to embrace their right and duty to share in political life. A citizen who is *registered* to vote likely *will* vote and, in anticipation of casting his or her ballot, will become more aware of the important policy issues of the day.

***“We are called to bring together  
our principles and our political choices,  
our values and our votes,  
to help build a better world.”***

*(Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States)*

## **Registering Online**

In the weeks preceding the registration deadline, parishes are encouraged to include information about online voter registration in their bulletins. The Florida voter registration application requires an original signature. If the application is completed online, it must be printed and signed prior to mailing to the appropriate county supervisor of elections. A sample **bulletin announcement** follows:

### **Use Your Voice and Vote**

Parishioners who are not registered to vote for the upcoming elections may do so by visiting the Florida Catholic Conference website at [www.flacathconf.org](http://www.flacathconf.org) and clicking on “Register to Vote”. Follow the instructions for completing and mailing a voter registration form. You will receive a voter registration card in the mail to confirm your registration. Follow this same procedure to update your name, address or change your party affiliation. Voters must be registered by July 16 to vote in the August 14 Primary. Participation in the November 6 General Election requires registration by October 9.

## **Conducting Voter Registration Drives**

Conducting voter registration drives require great care and strict adherence to existing Florida regulations. **Parishes should obtain permission from the (arch)diocese before conducting third-party voter registration drives.**

A third-party voter registration organization means any person, entity, or organization that solicits or collects any voter registration application. Prior to engaging in any voter registration activities, a third-party voter registration organization must register with the Florida Division of Elections and submit the name of a registered agent.

An organization that collects voter registration applications serves as a fiduciary to the applicant, ensuring that any voter registration application, irrespective of party affiliation, race, ethnicity or gender, shall be promptly delivered to the Division of Elections or county supervisor of elections. If a voter registration application collected by a third-party registration organization is not promptly delivered, the organization will be liable for fines ranging from \$50-\$1000.

For additional information regarding third-party voter registration drives, see the Florida Division of Elections website at: <http://election.dos.state.fl.us/voter-registration/third-party.shtml>.

# Candidate Appearances

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## Requests from Candidates to Speak / Appear at Gatherings

In an election year, candidates for public office aggressively seek opportunities to promote their campaigns. Parish gatherings provide especially attractive opportunities for politicians who seek support for their candidacies. At such gatherings, what most candidates want is the chance to address the entire group. These guidelines should be followed:

1. Candidates should never be permitted to speak in connection with Mass or any other religious service. If a candidate seeks to do so, straightforwardly deny permission, citing Internal Revenue Service (IRS) regulations governing political activity of tax-exempt religious organizations. You might also make clear that religious services are inappropriate occasions for partisan politics.
2. A candidate for a given office should not be permitted to address a parish-sponsored event (e.g., communion breakfast, parish committee meeting, etc.), unless all other candidates for that office have been invited to make a presentation at the same event.
3. A parish official may introduce a public office holder to participants in a parish-sponsored event, but not in that person's capacity as a candidate. Thus, a senator or congressman may be recognized as "Senator" or "Representative," but not as a candidate for reelection to the U.S. or Florida Senate or House of Representatives.
4. A public figure or expert who also is a candidate may be allowed to speak in his/her capacity as public figure or expert without providing equal access to other candidates. However, the following precautions must be taken in order not to violate IRS rules:
  - a. the person must speak only in his/her capacity as expert or public figure;
  - b. no mention may be made of his/her candidacy;
  - c. no campaign activity may occur in connection with the appearance; and
  - d. all communications, oral or written, should identify the other-than-candidate capacity in which the person is appearing and should not mention his/her candidacy. The IRS has made clear that if the primary purpose of the invitation is to showcase an individual's candidacy, the organization may violate election rules *even if no campaign activity occurs*.

## **Conducting Candidate Forums / Debates / Candidate Nights**

Parishes may sponsor unbiased public forums, debates and lectures in which candidates explain their views to the public, but there must be no indication of a bias for or against any candidate, party, or position. Those sponsoring candidate forums must invite all candidates qualified for election (though some may opt not to attend), have questions prepared and presented in a non-partisan fashion, cover a broad range of issues, give each candidate an equal opportunity to present views on issues discussed, and make no comments indicating approval or disapproval of any candidate.

**ALL CANDIDATES FOR A PARTICULAR OFFICE ARE TO BE INVITED TO PARTICIPATE, SINCE EXCLUDING CANDIDATES MAY EVIDENCE BIAS.** However, there are specific circumstances in which candidates may be excluded. For example, a candidate debate during the *primary* election campaign may be limited to legally qualified candidates seeking the nomination of a particular political party.

Since the work involved in hosting a candidate forum requires careful advance planning, the following guidelines are offered:

1. Contact the offices of the Florida Catholic Conference for assistance in planning your forum. The Conference has experience with candidate forums and has established relationships with many of the incumbents and other candidates.
2. Discuss the ground rules for the forum early in the process and ensure that all parties involved agree to these. Because many candidates represent an area that is larger than the boundaries of one parish, candidate forums are often organized most effectively in cooperation with other groups, such as nearby parishes, diocesan offices, Catholic Charities offices, etc.
3. Treat all candidates alike. This includes invitation and follow-up, the information you provide in advance, the questions they are asked, and the opportunities they have to respond. If all candidates appear at the public forum to speak, all candidates may distribute their campaign literature. If all candidates do not appear to speak, no distribution of campaign literature should be permitted.
4. Cover a broad range of issues. This will more effectively educate voters and will avoid any appearance of bias.
5. Use an independent nonpartisan panel to prepare and present questions. The moderator may not comment on the questions or imply approval or disapproval of any of the candidates.

6. Plan your turnout strategy and be realistic about your ability to bring out a crowd so that you don't promise more than you can deliver. Candidates must feel that the event is worthwhile and that they will be able to address a significant number of people.
7. Screen questions from the audience before they are asked to ensure they follow the guidelines of the forum.
8. Identify leaders for several roles, including moderator, timekeeper, greeters (for the candidates and others), and publicity coordinators.
9. Develop a press release several weeks in advance of the event and follow up with the diocesan newspaper and local secular media (newspaper, radio, and television).

Note: In instances when diocesan media are conducting broadcast interviews, it is recommended that all candidates be available on the same program.

*“The Church is engaged in the political process but should not be used. We welcome dialogue with political leaders and candidates; we seek to engage and persuade public officials.”*



*“The Church is principled but not ideological. We cannot compromise basic principles or moral teaching. ”*

*(Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States)*



## Candidate Questionnaire Project (CQP)

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The Candidate Questionnaire Project is an effort supported by the bishops of Florida to assist Catholics and the broader community to become informed voters. Being familiar with candidates' positions on issues involving human life and dignity and the common good is essential to responsible, faithful citizenship.

Questions on public policy issues are posed to all congressional, state legislative and gubernatorial candidates in Florida and pertain to issues of concern to the Church that are anticipated to appear before lawmakers in the coming term. A broad range of issues are covered, such as: abortion, embryonic stem cell research, death penalty, marriage, persons with disabilities, education, immigration, conscience protection, religious freedom, alternative energy and nuclear weapons. Congressional and state questions and responses received from candidates are available at [www.flacathconf.org](http://www.flacathconf.org).

**Materials prepared as part of the Candidate Questionnaire Project are the only surveys/polls approved by the bishops of Florida for use in parish bulletins or diocesan publications. Surveys or polls by outside organizations are not approved for distribution by Church entities unless prior approval has been granted by the local diocesan bishop or the Florida Catholic Conference.**

Evaluations of candidates or political parties by Church entities are to be avoided. **Examples of objectionable evaluations are as follows:**

1. Encouraging readers or listeners (e.g. a homily) to vote for or against a particular candidate or party;
2. Labeling a candidate or party as "pro school choice" or "anti-life"; such a practice removes objectivity by not allowing readers to evaluate a candidate's position themselves;
3. Using plus (+) or minus (-) signs or similar markings to evaluate the candidate or party;
4. Rating candidates or parties on a scale of "one to ten" for example, or otherwise saying "X is good", "Y is better"; and
5. Using marked sample ballots.

## Issue-Oriented Activities

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Advocacy that supports or opposes public policy issues (and not candidates or parties) is encouraged. Such advocacy is not partisan activity. Church organizations may support public policies and legislative proposals that affirm and promote the dignity and rights of the human person and oppose policies and proposals that violate them. Per IRS Regulations, such activities must not constitute a substantial part of the organization's overall activity.

The following are examples of acceptable activity:

1. Educational efforts about issues and in support of or opposition to proposed legislation;
2. Encouragement of letter writing campaigns and other contacts with state or federal legislators designed to educate them and to develop support or opposition for proposed legislation;
3. Distribution of fliers containing a statement about issues before the United States Congress or the Florida legislature, and the names and contact information of senators and representatives;
4. Preaching and distribution of information concerning issues dealing with the sanctity of life and the protection of human dignity;
5. Support or opposition for ballot measures, i.e. constitutional amendment initiatives, including distribution of petitions for placement of an amendment on an election ballot when approved by the bishop in advance.

*“...the responsibility to make choices in political life rests with each individual in light of a properly formed conscience, and that participation goes well beyond casting a vote in a particular election.”*

*(Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States)*

## Grassroots Advocacy by Catholic Faithful

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The **Florida Catholic Conference (FCC) Advocacy Network** informs the Catholic faithful of current legislative issues that relate to areas of Church teaching, and it offers an easily accessible channel of communication to assist in sharing concerns with elected officials. The following are provided via email to members:

- timely action alerts urging you to email or call your lawmakers on key bills at both the state and federal levels;
- sample messages for you to use in communications with your elected officials;
- current legislative reports and summaries during the Florida legislative session;
- bishops statements, position papers and educational materials;
- information about upcoming events; and
- links to helpful resources.

Those who are interested can sign-up by visiting [www.flacathconf.org](http://www.flacathconf.org) and clicking on **Join FCC Advocacy**. There is no cost to participate. The Florida Catholic Conference does not share subscriber information with any other individuals, groups or organizations.

*“...Catholic lay women and men  
can become actively involved:  
running for office;  
working within political parties;  
communicating their concerns  
and positions to elected officials;  
and joining diocesan social mission  
or advocacy networks,  
state Catholic conference initiatives,  
community organizations, and  
other efforts to apply authentic  
moral teaching in the public square.”*

*(Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States)*



## Catholic Days at the Capitol

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Each year, during the Regular Florida Legislative Session, Catholics are invited to Tallahassee to participate in Catholic Days at the Capitol. Participants from across the state attend a legislative briefing before attending scheduled meetings with their elected officials. A luncheon is held for Catholic Days participants, Florida's bishops and legislators. Participants are also invited to attend the annual Red Mass of the Holy Spirit. This Mass, which is attended by State officials, lawmakers, judges, the Catholic lawyers guild and members of the community, is celebrated to pray for those working in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government.

**2012 Catholic Days at the Capitol** are being held **February 7-8**, with the **Red Mass** scheduled for the evening of **February 8, 2012**. Those interested in attending the events should contact their diocesan coordinator who is listed on the Florida Catholic Conference web site at [www.flacathconf.org](http://www.flacathconf.org).

## **Church Coordination and Communication on Issues Related to the Legislature and State Agencies**

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The Florida Catholic Conference serves as liaison to state government on matters of concern to the Catholic Church in the seven dioceses of the Province of Miami, as a nonpartisan public policy voice on behalf of the Catholic bishops of Florida.

It is the policy of the bishops of Florida that diocesan representatives coordinate with Florida Catholic Conference staff when communicating with state legislators and agencies, and when participating at local delegation meetings.

In order to assure proper communication and coordination, Conference staff should be apprised in advance of those instances when diocesan representatives are visiting or communicating with state agencies or legislators, whether by phone, in writing or in person in Tallahassee or at a legislator's district office, or at local legislative delegation meetings.

In instances when Conference staff does not participate in meetings of this nature, questions and other reactions from legislators or agency officials should be shared with the Conference.

Presenters on behalf of a diocese at local legislative delegation meetings must be retained or employed by the diocese and have approval of the chancellor or the bishop's office in advance of offering any testimony or information. Messages presented should be crafted and coordinated in conjunction with Florida Catholic Conference staff.

## Resource List

Bishops of Florida 2010 Election Year Statement: *Vote with a properly formed conscience in order to defend human life and protect dignity*, October 2010.

Florida Catholic Conference Web site, [www.flacathconf.org](http://www.flacathconf.org).

Florida Department of State, Division of Elections, <http://election.dos.state.fl.us/index.shtml>.

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States with Introductory Note, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011.

God is Love (Deus Caritas Est), Encyclical Letter of Pope Benedict XVI, 2006.

Political Activity Guidelines for Catholic Organizations, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Office of General Counsel, July 2007.

The Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae), Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II, 1995.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Faithful Citizenship Web site, [www.faithfulcitizenship.org](http://www.faithfulcitizenship.org).

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