

# FLORIDA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

## Election and Political Activities Guide 2008



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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.*

## 2008 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) 205-6817 or email [flacathconf@flacathconf.org](mailto:flacathconf@flacathconf.org)**.

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**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).**

State and congressional questions for the 2008 Candidate Questionnaire Project will be available via the Conference's website in April 2008.

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# The Church's Role In Political Life

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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 down-trodden free" (Luke 4:18). His example and His 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.

While it is increasingly acknowledged that major public issues have moral dimensions and that religious values have public consequences, there often is confusion and controversy over the participation of religious groups in public life.

The importance of the separation of church and state is often misunderstood. 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. Pope Benedict XVI explains in his first encyclical, "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." (*Deus Caritas Est*, 28a) By advocating its social doctrine through education and rational argument, the Church opens minds and helps to form the consciences of both those actively involved in political life and the electorate.

***"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, USCCB, November 2007)*

In his 1995 visit to the United States, Pope John Paul II said, "Democracy needs wisdom, democracy needs virtue. Democracy serves what is true and right when it safeguards the dignity of every human person, when it respects inviolable and inalienable human rights, and when it makes the common good the end criterion regulating all public and social life." To achieve these purposes, democracy needs each of us to participate in the public debate and to apply Gospel values to our participation.

Catholics are challenged to use the resources of our faith and the opportunities of our democracy to defend human rights and to work for a more peaceful and just society. In a statement prior to the 2006 general election, the bishops of Florida declared, "Before casting our votes, we must seek to:

- (1) develop a well-formed conscience shaped by fundamental moral principals;
- (2) consult and become familiar with the sacred and certain teachings of the Church;
- (3) seek accurate information on issues that impact human life and promote a just society without relying strictly on campaign advertisements or party affiliation;
- (4) encourage all candidates to clarify their positions on key issues;
- (5) actively participate in discussions with others, especially our family and those close to us, by respectfully listening and offering our own insight; and
- (6) seek wisdom through prayer and reflection and rely on the help of the Holy Spirit to guide our voting decisions."

(Bishops of Florida Urge Active Faithful Citizenship: *Study, Discuss, Pray and Then Vote on November 7!*, September 30, 2006)

The Church joins the public debate to share its experience in serving the powerless and to add its values to the political dialogue. This kind of participation does not involve religious tests for candidates, or telling people for whom they should or should not vote. Rather, it seeks to lift up the moral dimensions of public issues. It encourages Catholics, as believers and citizens, to use the resources of our faith in building a society that is more respectful of life and human dignity and more cognizant of the Christian obligation to seek peace and justice.

## **Catechism of the Catholic Church**

***"It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person...As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life."***

(CCC, Nos. 1913-1915)

# 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...**encourage active participation in church-sponsored voter registration efforts, "get-out-the-vote" campaigns, and other non-partisan voter education initiatives.

**Do...**urge parishioners to register and vote. Registration may be accomplished by means of the Internet or through voter registration drives.

**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, campaign or political action committee. 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 just one 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 or other religious leaders are urged to avoid endorsements, contributions, electioneering, or other political activity. 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, should 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 e-mail to communicate with parishioners and the general public. The guidelines set forth here apply equally to websites and electronic communications. Diocesan or parish websites must not link to other sites 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

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 **2008 PRESIDENTIAL PREFERENCE PRIMARY** is scheduled for **JANUARY 29, 2008**. A constitutional amendment concerning property tax will also be on the ballot at this time. The **PRIMARY ELECTION** will occur on **TUESDAY, AUGUST 26, 2008**. The **GENERAL ELECTION** will occur on **TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2008**. The deadline for registering to vote in the Presidential Preference Primary is December 31, 2007. The deadline for registering to vote in the Primary Election is July 28, 2008. The deadline for registering to vote in the General Election is October 6, 2008.

All county supervisors of elections will begin conducting early voting 15 days before an election. Early voting will end on the 2nd day before the election. 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 the 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,  
USCCB, November 2007)*

## Registering On-Line

In the weeks preceding the registration deadline, parishes are encouraged to include information about on-line voter registration in their bulletins. A sample **bulletin announcement** follows:

*To vote in this year's election you must be registered. Parishioners who are not registered may do so through the Internet. Visit the web site of the Florida Catholic Conference, [www.flacathconf.org](http://www.flacathconf.org), and click on "Register To Vote". Follow the instructions for filling out and mailing a voter registration form. You will receive a voter registration card in the mail to confirm receipt of your registration. You may also follow this same procedure to update your registration if your name or address has changed since the last time you voted, or if you wish to change your party affiliation. If you are registered prior to July 28, 2008, you may vote in both the primary and the general elections. Participation in the November 4 general election requires registration by October 6.*

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.

## Conducting Voter Registration Drives

Note: Pursuant to a federal court-ordered injunction issued on August 28, 2006, the Florida Department of State will not enforce the Third-Party Voter Registration Organization law (section 97.0575, Florida Statutes). This case is currently under appeal before the U.S. Court of Appeals.

Pending further notice to the contrary, third-party voter registration activities conducted by Church entities are not subject to the Third-Party Voter Registration Organization law but must adhere to all other applicable provisions of the Florida Election Code. Therefore, it is advised that those holding third party registration drives:

- contact their county supervisor of election offices prior to any registration drive to inquire what assistance and training is provided;
- deliver all completed registration forms to the appropriate county supervisor of elections prior to applicable deadlines;
- not destroy, mutilate, deface or alter a voter registration form or obstruct or delay the delivery of a voter registration form;
- not coerce an individual to register for a particular political party;
- not challenge an individual's right to vote.

# Candidate Appearances

## 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 to assist you:

1. 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.;
2. 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;
3. Cover a broad range of issues. This will more effectively educate voters and will avoid any appearance of bias;
4. 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;
5. 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;

6. Screen questions from the audience before they are asked to ensure they follow the guidelines of the forum;
7. Identify leaders for several roles, including moderator, timekeeper, greeters (for the candidates and others), and publicity coordinators;
8. 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);
9. 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.

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, USCCB, November 2007)*

# Candidate Questionnaire Project (CQP)

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The Candidate Questionnaire Project is a collaborative effort of the Florida Catholic Conference, *The Florida Catholic* newspaper, the Florida Council of Catholic Women and the Florida State Council of Knights of Columbus.

Questions on public policy issues are posed to all 2008 congressional and state candidates in Florida, and all candidates are encouraged to respond. The questions pertain to issues of concern for the Church including: abortion, embryonic stem cell research, cloning, health care, assisted suicide, death penalty, education, undocumented immigrants, affordable housing, the definition of marriage, U.S. military engagement, and the environment. State and congressional questions will be available via the Conference's website, [www.flacathconf.org](http://www.flacathconf.org), in April of this year. All candidate responses received will also be available via this website.

**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

Advocacy that supports or opposes public policy issues (and not candidates or parties) is encouraged. Such advocacy is not partisan activity. Church organizations may, and properly should, 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.

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.

***“...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, USCCB, November 2007)*



## 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.

At their September 29, 2007 meeting, the bishops of Florida agreed to a policy that diocesan representatives will 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 staff does not participate in meetings of this nature, questions and other reactions from legislators or agency officials should be shared with Conference staff.

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.

## Grassroots Advocacy by Catholic Faithful

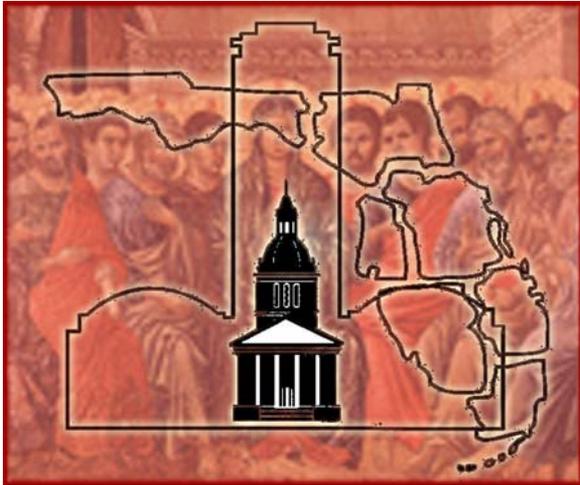
The **Florida Catholic Conference (FCC) Advocacy Network** informs the Catholic faithful of current legislative issues that relate to areas of Church teaching, and it offers an easily accessible channel of communication to assist in sharing concerns with elected officials. The following are provided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

- timely action alerts urging you to email or call your legislators 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;
- *The Common Good* electronic newsletter;
- 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,  
USCCB, November 2007)*



## Catholic Days at the Capitol

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Each spring, during the Regular Florida Legislative Session, Catholics are invited to Tallahassee to participate in Catholic Days at the Capitol. Participants attend a legislative briefing before attending scheduled meetings with their elected officials. A luncheon is held on day two 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 and members of the Catholic lawyers guild, is celebrated to pray for those working in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government.

**2008 Catholic Days at the Capitol** are being held **March 11-12**, with the **Red Mass** scheduled for the evening of **March 12, 2008**. 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).

## Resource List

2008 Candidate Questionnaire Project, [www.informedcatholicvoter.org](http://www.informedcatholicvoter.org).

Bishops of Florida Urge Active Faithful Citizenship: *Study, Discuss, Pray and Then Vote on November 7!*, September 30, 2006.

*Faithful Citizenship: Tips for Conducting Candidate Forums*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Department of Social Development and World Peace, 2004.

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

Florida Department of State, Division of Elections, [www.dos.state.fl.us](http://www.dos.state.fl.us).

*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States*, USCCB, November 2007.

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

*Political Activity Guidelines for Pastors and Parishes*, Florida Catholic Conference, June 2006.

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

Title IX, Chapters 97-107, Electors and Elections, 2007 Florida Statutes.

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

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