

# 2020 ELECTION YEAR GUIDELINES for Catholic Parishes and Organizations

The Catholic Church calls upon people of faith to share their values in public discussions and to promote actions for the common good. In that vein, Michigan Catholic Conference (MCC) strongly encourages Catholics to register to vote, to become informed on key issues, and to participate in elections. However, it is necessary to clarify appropriate political and electoral activity for Catholic entities. This publication is intended to assist Catholic parishes, schools, and other 501(c)(3) organizations that qualify for tax-exempt status under the Internal Revenue Code.

“Loving our neighbor and caring for the least among us means supporting leaders and policies that promote the common good and protect society’s most vulnerable members. Helping Catholics to recognize and act on this dimension of their faith is an essential task for parish leaders.” —USCCB, *Do’s and Don’ts*, [bit.ly/38HsyXd](https://bit.ly/38HsyXd)



**MICHIGAN  
CATHOLIC**  
CONFERENCE

# BEFORE ELECTION DAY

## Are pastors and staff allowed to support political candidates?

Individuals cannot be prohibited from endorsing, volunteering for, or donating to candidates in their own personal capacity and time. However, it can be difficult to separate one's personal activity from his or her role as clergy or an employee of the Church. When publicly supporting a candidate, pastors and employees should make it clear that they are not acting or speaking on behalf of the Church.

The organization's facilities or resources—such as but not limited to envelopes, email, parishioner lists, and paid working time—**cannot** be used to benefit a campaign.

## What issues should the Church encourage Catholics to reflect upon before voting?

The Catholic Church does not support or oppose candidates but instead seeks to focus attention on the moral dimensions of civic issues. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) urges Catholics to reflect upon its teaching found in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*. The document encourages Catholics to consider the range of positions important to the Church, to avoid acting as single-issue voters, and to weigh critical issues according to their moral significance.

Organizations can find the document from the USCCB, as well as helpful promotional materials such as videos and bulletin inserts, at [faithfulcitizenship.org](http://faithfulcitizenship.org).

## Can Catholic entities post election-related signs?

Signs endorsing candidates or political parties are prohibited. However, three types of political signs are allowed: 1) signs advocating for or against a particular ballot issue, especially upon those where MCC has taken a public position,



2) signs encouraging people to get registered to vote, and 3) signs indicating polling place locations on Election Day, such as those that read “vote here.”

## **What voter guides or election-year materials can be distributed?**

The MCC Board of Directors welcome parishes to share election-year material as long as it has been published by the diocesan bishop, MCC, or the USCCB.

Items prepared by other sources cannot be distributed by parishes because: 1) they do not outline positions on the full range of issues Catholics should consider, and 2) some organizations that prepare materials may not be 501(c)(3) entities and are not subject to the same rules that Church and affiliated organizations must follow.

## **What if a parish wants to invite candidates to come speak?**

Candidates and elected officials can be invited to parishes, provided IRS rules are followed. If an individual is invited to appear as a candidate, all other candidates for the same office must be provided equal access. A parish may invite a current public official who is running for office without inviting all other candidates, provided the purpose is not to promote that individual's candidacy. Public officials are able to speak about issues but may never campaign during a visit.

## **Can the organization host voter registration efforts?**

Yes, as long as the drive is educational and non-partisan. The organization must ensure that any partisan election materials, such as brochures promoting a certain candidate or party, are not distributed. Information about the election date and voting must be consistently shared with participants in the drive, regardless of their political preference. If passing out the names of the candidates running for each office, all must be listed without any indication of favoritism.



## Can Catholic organizations post election material on their website or social media?

Catholic organizations must be mindful about what they post on their websites and social media. Linking to candidate-related materials is not necessarily prohibited, but all links must be evaluated based on their context and purpose. If a communication expresses a pro/con opinion about a candidate and is attributable to the organization, it should not be posted. Organizations may provide links to candidate websites as long as all candidates are listed and presented in a neutral way. Institutions wanting clarification about a particular instance should seek local legal advice.

## What is *Civilize It*, and can its materials be promoted?

*Civilize It* is a project of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops that invites Catholics to model civility, love for neighbor, and respectful dialogue during conversation and engagement in the political process. Parishes and Catholic organizations are not only allowed to promote the campaign and efforts to build greater civility in the community but are encouraged to do so.

The website [civilizeit.org](http://civilizeit.org) provides resources for promoting this campaign.

# ON ELECTION DAY

## If the Catholic entity is a polling location, can campaigns pass out literature there?

Limited campaign literature may be distributed by election volunteers—not staff of the institution—outside the polling place, as long as all election rules are followed, such as being at least 100 feet from the entrance. This distribution should not be linked to the Catholic organization.

# AFTER ELECTION DAY

## Can a parish or Catholic institution share election results?

Information about the results of the election, especially as provided by Michigan Catholic Conference, can be shared as long as that information does not editorialize about the results or promote a certain official or political party.

## Can Catholic entities invite their new elected officials to visit or to an event?

Yes, Catholic entities are encouraged to meet with and to invite their public officials to visit. It is important for these officials to become familiar with the institution and its work—and vice versa—as long as the visit is non-partisan and consistent with the IRS Code and Church guidelines.

## Can the institution share and apply Catholic teaching to public issues?

“The obligation to teach the moral truths that should shape our lives, including our public lives, is central to the mission given to the Church” (*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*). Catholic entities can and should share Church teaching and its relevance for public issues during and after election season.

Michigan Catholic Conference, the public policy voice of the Church in this state, offers resources for this activity year-round at [micatholic.org](http://micatholic.org).



## About 2020 Election Year Guidelines for Catholic Parishes and Organizations

This publication highlights common questions during an election year, but it is not meant to be an exhaustive list. MCC encourages Catholic organizations to consult with their local diocesan attorney if they have any questions. USCCB also offers a useful resource, *Political Activities Guidelines*, with further information at [bit.ly/2ARavlm](https://bit.ly/2ARavlm).

The Michigan Catholic Conference Board of Directors often speaks to issues that are both moral and political. The consistent ethic of life demands a concern for all the weak and vulnerable members of our society throughout all phases of life and must be promoted through the Church's social teaching and its applications to today's social concerns.

The independence and integrity of the Church's social teaching must be maintained. To this end, we reaffirm the long-standing prohibition of the distribution of election year material unless published by the diocesan bishop, the Michigan Catholic Conference, or the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Published by Michigan Catholic Conference

510 South Capitol Avenue  
Lansing, Michigan 48933

Phone: (800) 395-5565  
[publicpolicy@micatholic.org](mailto:publicpolicy@micatholic.org)



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