

ELECTION GUIDELINES

Maryland Catholic Parishes | 2026

This is a brief overview, not an exhaustive list, of what is and is not allowed regarding political activity and the Catholic Church. Please contact Jenny Kraska, executive director, Maryland Catholic Conference (communications@mdcatholic.org) with questions or if you are unsure about an activity.

1. What kinds of activities are prohibited generally by the IRS under section 501(c)(3)?

Under the rubric "participation in or intervention in any political campaign on behalf of or opposition to any candidate for public office," section 501(c)(3) prohibits a range of activities, generally including:

- statements, in any medium, of support or opposition for any candidate, political party or political action committee (PAC)
- providing or soliciting financial support to or for any candidate, political party or PAC
- soliciting in-kind support to or for any candidate, political party or PAC
- distribution of voter education materials biased with respect to any candidate, political party or PAC
- conducting public forums, debates or lectures biased with respect to any candidate, political party or PAC
- conducting voter registration or get-out-the-vote drives biased with respect to any candidate, political party or PAC

2. May candidates make appearances at Church events?

Whether a Catholic organization may invite a candidate to speak at a sponsored event, per indications from the IRS, depends upon all the facts and circumstances surrounding the invitation and whether the candidate is invited in her capacity as a candidate or in her individual capacity.

Please contact the Maryland Catholic Conference with specific questions on this topic.

A candidate's attendance at an exempt organization-sponsored event that is open to the public, such as a concert, lecture or church picnic, does not by itself

constitute intervention in a political campaign. However, the sponsoring organization should ensure that no political campaigning takes place at the event, including distribution of campaign literature; that the sponsoring organization does not publicly recognize the candidate for public office; and that a nonpartisan atmosphere is maintained.

3. Are political bumper stickers allowed?

Political bumper stickers should not be placed on vehicles owned or leased by Catholic organizations. Section 501(c)(3) does not prohibit the placement of political bumper stickers on the personally owned or leased vehicles of Church officials or employees.

4. Can campaign materials be distributed?

Catholic organizations may not distribute voter education or other campaign or ballot-related materials prepared by any candidate, political party or PAC.

Voter education material approved and/or provided by the Maryland Catholic Conference can and should be distributed in churches.

5. Can signatures be collected for ballot access?

Catholic organizations may not collect signatures on nor encourage voters to sign petitions to enable any candidate to appear on an election ballot. Even if all candidates are treated equally, this activity directly furthers the political candidacies of the individuals involved.

Signatures may be collected at churches in the furtherance of putting an issue on the ballot, **but only with the express permission** of the bishop and/or Maryland Catholic Conference.

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6. Can voter education be provided?

During election campaigns, Catholic organizations may educate voters about the issues. In addition, they may educate voters about candidates' positions on the issues through such activities as sponsorship of candidate forums and distribution of voter education materials, e.g., incumbents' voting records or results of candidate polls or questionnaires. Such activities, if unbiased in content, structure, format and context, do not violate the prohibition against political campaign intervention

NOTE: Voter education material approved and/or provided by the Maryland Catholic Conference can and should be distributed in Churches.

7. Can a Catholic organization make endorsements and/or statements of opposition?

A Catholic organization may not directly or indirectly make any statement, in any medium, to endorse, support or oppose any candidate for public office, political party, or PAC. (In some circumstances the Church will take a position on a ballot issue; guidance in this area will come from the Maryland Catholic Conference.)

8. Can financial support be provided to a candidate or political party?

A Catholic organization may not provide or solicit financial support, including even market-rate loans or loan guarantees, for or on behalf of any candidate, political party, or PAC.

9. Can fundraising be conducted on behalf of a candidate or political party?

A Catholic organization should not conduct fundraising events or activities, or otherwise solicit funds, for or on behalf of any candidate, political party, or PAC. Likewise, a Catholic organization should not permit fundraising for or on behalf of any candidate, political party, or PAC at any sponsored event.

10. Can in-kind support be offered to a candidate or political party?

A Catholic organization may not provide or solicit in-kind support, such as free or selective use of volunteers, paid staff, facilities, equipment, office supplies, mailing lists, etc. for or on behalf of any candidate, political party or PAC.

11. Can political signs be placed on Church property?

Political signs should not be placed on property owned by Catholic organizations or rented by Catholic organizations for official business. Section 501(c)(3) does not prohibit the placement of political signs on the personally-owned property of Church officials or employees.

12. Can the Church conduct voter registration/get-out-the-vote drives?

Catholic organizations may sponsor voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives, provided that no bias for or against any candidate, political party or voting position is evidenced. Such bias would be indicated by distribution of partisan literature or materials indicating the sponsoring organization's political viewpoint in connection with the voter registration or get-out-the-vote drive, by targeting registration or get-out-the-vote drives toward individuals who support the organization's positions or a particular candidate or party, or by coordinating the drive with candidates or their committees.

Catholic organization voter registration or get-out-the-vote efforts should not be conducted:

- in cooperation with any political campaign
- according to the identity of the candidates
- in a manner targeting members of a particular party
- based upon a candidate's or party's agreement or disagreement with the sponsoring organization's positions

NOTE: The State of Maryland imposes very specific guidelines for conducting a voter registration drive. If you would like to encourage voter registration at your parish, please contact the Maryland Catholic Conference.

