



UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

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VOTER EDUCATION AND VOTER REGISTRATION

In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation. — *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, No. 13.

In an era when more and more people worldwide are gaining the right to vote, fewer Americans take advantage of this right. Sixty million eligible Americans are not registered to vote. In the November 2008 elections, only 64 percent of eligible voters went to the polls.

Catholic social teaching strongly promotes active citizenship. Through our opportunities as citizens, we can help shape a world more committed to protecting human life and dignity and promoting justice and peace. In their statement *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the bishops state, "In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation" (No. 13).

The following ideas and suggestions are designed to help parishes promote civic responsibility by offering non-partisan voter education rooted in the values of the Scriptures and Catholic teaching. They are intended to be adapted to the unique needs and opportunities of each parish community. The USCCB Office of General Counsel (202-541-3300) provides [detailed guidance](#) on what is allowed and not allowed under the law.

Non-partisan Voter Education

A key task of social concerns and pro-life committees is to help parishioners understand how the lessons of Scripture and the teaching of the Church provide guidance for the many issues facing our communities, nation and world. This task should be carried out year in and year out, but it is especially important during the year leading up to a major election. If, well in advance of the election, opportunities exist for parishioners to learn about the principles of Catholic social teaching and how these principles have been applied to important issues, it will be much easier for them to use their faith as their guide for political choices.

The best parish non-partisan voter education campaigns will include the following three distinct steps. To avoid the appearance of partisanship and to avoid violating laws regarding political activities, it is critical that these three steps not be undertaken simultaneously. **It is essential to obtain approval from your diocesan attorney before using any voter education materials provided by groups other than your diocese, your state Catholic conference, or the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.**

1. Step One: Education about how Scripture and Catholic social teaching can provide a framework of values that can be used to assess candidates, parties, and issues.

Include an *excerpt from Catholic social teaching* in each bulletin so that parishioners become familiar over time with its key themes and principles. See the bulletin quotes at www.faithfulcitizenship.org.

Hold a *Scripture reflection session* when participants can discuss lessons from the Scripture and how they can be applied to our world. Possible Scripture passages for consideration include:

Dt 30:19
 Psalm 139: 13-14
 Dt 24:17-22
 Zec 7:9-10
 Lk 10:25-37
 Jer 22:16
 Mt 25:31-46
 Jas 2:14-17
 Lk 4:18

Distribute the cards with seven key themes from Catholic social teaching (*Themes from Catholic Social Teaching*) at all Masses one Sunday.

Host a discussion session on Catholic social teaching using the Themes from Sharing Catholic Social Teaching cards, and the video and the discussion guide on seven themes of Catholic social teaching, *In the Footsteps of Jesus*.

Sponsor an adult education session using the video *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* and the "Goals for Political Life" outlined in the bishops' statement.

Distribute the parish bulletin version of the bishops' statement *The Challenge of Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* at all Masses one Sunday.

Encourage small faith communities and other parish organizations to use the strategies above to study Catholic social teaching and the bishops' statement, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*.

Your diocesan staff for social action, pro-life, and education, as well as your state Catholic conference, can provide assistance and ideas about speakers.

2. Step Two: An independent voter registration drive at a time consistent with your state's elections laws.

See the suggestions below for strategies and important legal considerations.

3. Step Three: Shortly before the election, an independent voter education effort involving candidate surveys and other information approved by your diocesan attorney or state Catholic conference.

Contact your diocesan staff for social action, pro-life, education, and others, as well as your state Catholic conference, to see if they have conducted a survey of candidates.

Bulletin Insert

The weekend before the election:

Faithful Citizenship

"In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation. This obligation is rooted in our baptismal commitment to follow Jesus Christ and to bear Christian witness in all we do." -- *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, No. 13

Next Tuesday, November 6, 2012, the national and local elections will be held. We urge all parishioners to exercise their right and responsibility to vote.

Non-partisan Parish Voter Registration Drives

Why Non-partisan Parish Voter Registration Drives Are Important

Non-partisan voter registration drives are excellent opportunities to educate parishioners about the Church's teaching regarding the importance of civic responsibility and active citizenship. Not only will you register those who are unregistered, but you will communicate the importance of voting to all other parish members who are present at the Mass or the meeting where the drive is conducted. Even if you only register a few voters, the message will reach many more.

Parishes are among the few institutions that can reach groups notably under-registered or under-represented in the political process:

Low-Income People: According to the U. S. Census Bureau, in 2008 only 52 percent of eligible voters whose families made under \$20,000 per year actually voted, compared to 64 percent of all eligible voters.

Racial and Ethnic Minorities: African Americans, Hispanics, and other racial and ethnic minorities have historically had voter participation rates significantly below the national average. In 2008, Non-Hispanic Whites (66 percent) and African Americans (65 percent) had the highest levels of voter turnout. However, voting rates for eligible Asians and Hispanics were only 49 percent. The National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry endorses a program of awareness of Christian responsibility and a national campaign for voter registration. The National Black Catholic Pastoral Plan calls for parishes to develop a sense of social consciousness and to advocate for social change and social development, which could include parish-based voter registration.

New Citizens, Immigrants, and Refugees: New citizens are often anxious to exercise their voting rights but are confused about the process. A parish voter registration campaign can help educate them about when and where they can vote. It can also present an opportunity to identify those who wish to become citizens. They can then be referred to your diocesan office for immigrants and refugees, which is often associated with Catholic Charities.

Youth: Young people vote at a low rate compared to the rest of the adult population. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2008 only 49 percent of all eligible young people between the ages of 18 and 24 voted, compared to 64 percent of all eligible voters.

Women: While women are now registering and voting in larger numbers, they are still under-represented in the political process.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2008* (May 2010), www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/p20-562.pdf

Ten Easy Steps for Organizing a Non-partisan Voter Registration Drive

1. Meet with your pastor and thoroughly discuss the plans for the non-partisan drive. Solicit ideas from him on how to make it successful. If appropriate, obtain the approval of the parish council. You may want to discuss the following:
 - Using bulletin inserts on issues and/or bulletin quotes from the bishops' statement during the weeks preceding the election. Camera-ready bulletin quotes are available at www.faithfulcitizenship.org.

- Publicizing the voter registration drive in the bulletin and in the announcements at Mass two weeks and again one week prior to the drive (see the sample bulletin announcements below).
 - Putting fliers and/or posters at the back of the church, in the hall, and at other appropriate locations.
 - Putting tables in the vestibule or outside church after the Masses one weekend to conduct a non-partisan registration drive.
 - Including a message in the homily about the Church's teaching on civic responsibility on the weekend preceding your registration drive and/or the weekend preceding the election. Ideas for homilists are available at www.faithfulcitizenship.org.
2. Form a committee if you need help conducting the drive. Committee members can help research voter registration laws, recruit volunteers, and carry out publicity. In order to avoid the appearance of partisanship, be sure to include members of all major political parties.
 3. Learn the registration procedures: Requirements vary from state to state and county to county. Contact your local election office to determine what methods are permitted in your area. In some areas, only official registrars are allowed to register voters and your election office will have to send someone to help with your registration. In other areas, volunteers can be deputized as registrars if they attend a training session. Some election offices will even arrange a special training for your group.
 4. Choose a weekend to conduct the drive after Masses: In some areas, registration closes as much as two months before the election. Check with your local election office and be sure to plan ahead.
 5. Recruit volunteers to help with registration after each Mass on the weekend you have chosen. Be clear about how many volunteers you need (ideally, one for every exit after each Saturday and Sunday liturgy). You may want to ask a men's or women's club, the social concerns committee, or other parish organizations to help identify volunteers. Be sure to have Spanish-speaking volunteers and Spanish language forms if appropriate for your parish. Also, to avoid the appearance of partisanship, make sure your volunteers include members of all major political parties.
 6. Meet or telephone each volunteer and make sure he or she knows the process your parish is using. Tell your volunteers when and where they will be needed and for how long; what they need to do to be deputized as registrars; where they will find registration materials on the day of the drive; what they are to do with the registrations when they are finished (some states require the registrar who

received the completed registration form to return it to the election office; others allow forms from many registrars to be collected and returned by one person); and what to do if they get a question they can't answer. Be sure to advise them that they must keep the drive non-partisan. Absolutely no comments or suggestions can be made about how a person should register or how a person should vote in the election.

7. Publicize your registration drive: You can use bulletin announcements, pulpit announcements, fliers, posters, and other materials. Below are sample bulletin announcements.
8. Conduct the drive.
 - Keep it non-partisan! Absolutely no suggestions can be made about how people should register. No materials relating to candidates, political parties, or issues involved in the campaign or of interest to the parish or sponsoring organization (including voter education materials) should be distributed as part of the voter registration process. Make sure your volunteers include members of all major political parties.
 - Set up the tables, one at each exit, with plenty of pens, registration forms, and instructions for volunteers.
9. Follow up.
 - Make sure all completed registration forms are returned to the election office.
 - Thank your volunteers and your pastor for their cooperation.
10. Get out the vote! On the weekend before the election, use bulletin inserts, pulpit announcements, the homily, fliers, and other materials to encourage parishioners to vote. If you know of someone who may need a ride to the polls, try to arrange one. Below is a sample bulletin announcement.

Sample Bulletin Announcements

Two weeks—and again one week—prior to the drive:

Voter Registration

_____ Parish will be conducting a non-partisan voter registration drive after all Masses on Saturday and Sunday, _____. As our bishops remind us, "In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation" *Faithful Citizenship*, No. 13. We urge you to register and vote in the upcoming election. There will be tables at each exit with registration cards. If you are not registered or have moved recently, please take time to register.

The day of the drive:

Voter Registration

Today we are conducting a non-partisan voter registration drive. Forms are available on tables at each exit. If you are not registered, please stop and fill out one of the registration forms. As Catholics, we have an obligation to promote the common good by exercising our right to vote. We urge you to register today.

Vote, and the choice is yours.

Don't vote, and the choice is theirs.

Register, or you have no choice!

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