



How to Conduct Voter Registration Drives

One excellent way for parishes to help voting-age parishioners participate in the political process is to conduct a voter-registration drive.

As the Virginia bishops have observed, “Participating in the political process, and thereby helping to create a more just society, is an essential part of what it means to be a follower of Christ in our Commonwealth today.” Voting is certainly an essential part of this civic responsibility, and voter-registration efforts encourage citizens to embrace their right and duty to share in the political life of our Commonwealth and our country. Registered citizens are more likely to vote and, in preparing to cast ballots, they will have opportunities to become more aware of important policy issues – including those that are vital to the lives and dignity of the most vulnerable members of their communities.

Three sections of materials are provided below to assist parishes in conducting nonpartisan voter-registration drives. The first is a section of legal guidelines – basic “do’s” and “don’t’s” to ensure that registration drives accord with IRS guidelines. The second piece is a list of 10 easy steps for conducting a drive. The third contains sample bulletin announcements if your parish decides to proceed with a drive.

For additional information, contact the Virginia Catholic Conference at (804) 225-8565 or by email at office@vacatholic.org.

Legal Guidelines

Exhibiting fairness to all candidates and parties is the fundamental principle that must be followed. All efforts must be free from bias for or against any candidate, political party, or voting position. Improper bias is a violation of federal policies for tax-exempt organizations (such as churches) and would be indicated by

- distribution of partisan literature or materials indicating the sponsoring organization’s positions in connection with the registration drive,
- targeting drives toward individuals who support the organization’s positions or a particular candidate or party, or
- coordinating the drive with candidates or their committees.

Additionally, voter-registration efforts by Catholic entities should not be conducted

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

Furthermore, materials used to publicize the drive should either

- not mention or depict candidates, or
- do so without favoritism.

Communications used should either

- not mention political parties, or
- mention them only to identify the party affiliation of all candidates named or depicted.

Communications should also be limited to

- urging registration and voting, and
- providing information about locations and hours of registration and voting.

Lastly, any services provided by drive sponsors should be made equally available without regard to a person's party affiliation or preference.

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:
 - 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 announcement 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.
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. Contact the Virginia State Board of Elections (VSBE) at (804) 864-8901 to set up training of volunteers and to obtain applications and supplies. Visit www.sbe.virginia.gov/cms/Voter_Information/Voter_Registration_Drives_Guidelines.html to obtain VSBE guidelines and other information online.
4. Choose a weekend to conduct the drive after Masses. In Virginia, the registration deadline for a general or primary election is 22 days before the election.
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; where they will find registration materials on the day of the drive; what they are to do with the registrations when they are finished (The applicant can return their application in the mail, or they can deliver the form in person to their local registration office, or by a volunteer from the parish – **all** voter registrations turned in to the parish **must** be given to the Office of the General Registrar within fifteen days after the person completed the card or by the registration deadline, whichever is first.) 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, even if the person registering asks for such comments or suggestions.**
7. Publicize your registration drive. You can use bulletin announcements (samples shown below), pulpit announcements, fliers, posters, and other materials.

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 are sample bulletin announcements.

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.” (*Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States*, p. 7) 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 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!**