



## How to Conduct Voter Registration Drives

In an era when more people worldwide are gaining the right to vote, many Americans are not exercising this right. As Catholics, we are called to practice faithful citizenship by giving witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ in our daily lives and especially in the public square:

In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation. ... The obligation to participate in political life is rooted in our baptismal commitment to follow Jesus Christ and to bear Christian witness in all we do.<sup>1</sup>

One excellent way for parishes to help voting-age Catholics engage in the political life of our Commonwealth and our country is to conduct voter registration drives. By preparing to cast ballots, registered voters will have opportunities to become more aware of important issues that are vital to human life and dignity, and to the common good.

This resource contains three sections 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 comply with federal and state guidelines. The second is a list of 10 easy steps for conducting a drive. The third contains samples of parish bulletin announcements to promote drives.

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

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<sup>1</sup> *[Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship](#): A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States*, p. 16.

# Legal Guidelines

Federal tax law and regulations ban political campaign activity by tax-exempt organizations such as churches and charities.<sup>2</sup> Exhibiting fairness to all candidates and parties is the fundamental principle that must be followed.

In other words, voter registration should not be conducted in cooperation with any political party or campaign. In addition, offers by other outside groups to assist in conducting voter registration drives should be declined if the group has a clear political agenda or partisan bias. All voter registration efforts must be free from bias for or against any candidate, political party or voting position. Such bias is a violation of the ban and would be indicated by:

- distribution of partisan literature or materials indicating the sponsoring organization's positions on issues in connection with the registration drive,
- targeting drives toward individuals or groups who may be more likely to support the organization's positions or a particular candidate or party, or
- coordinating the drive with parties, candidates or their committees.

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

- 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.

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<sup>2</sup> Internal Revenue Code (IRC) §501(c) (3).

Communications should also be limited to:

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

Importantly, 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 Nonpartisan Voter Registration Drive**

1. Meet with your pastor and thoroughly discuss the plans for the nonpartisan 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 Sample Bulletin Announcements on last pages of this resource).
- 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 nonpartisan 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 prior to the election.

2. Form a committee to help conduct the drive. Committee members can review [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 Department of Elections (ELECT)** at (804) 864-8901 or Toll Free: (800) 552-9745 to set up training of volunteers and to obtain applications and resources. Online registration training, [ELECT guidelines](#) and other key information are also available at [elections.virginia.gov](http://elections.virginia.gov). Complete the [Recommended Checklist for Voter Registration Drives](#).

- All individuals or organizations requesting twenty-five (25) or more voter registration [applications](#) from the [Virginia Department of Elections](#) or local

voter registration [offices](#) must register and complete ELECT certified training.<sup>3</sup> If the applications are requested on behalf of an organization, at least one agent of the organization seeking to obtain applications must complete the training and certify that the organization will require training for all persons collecting completed voter registration applications on behalf of the organization.

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 group, the social ministry 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. Additionally, confirm they are aware of Virginia's [voter eligibility criteria](#).
6. Meet with or phone 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 to do if they get questions they cannot answer; and what they are to do with the completed registrations. Applicants can return their applications in the mail, or they can deliver the forms in person to their local registration offices. A registration drive volunteer from the parish can also deliver applications. **All** voter registrations acquired at the parish **must** be mailed or delivered to the Office of the [General Registrar \(or the Virginia Department of Elections\)](#) within 10 days after the person completed the form or by 5 pm on the voter registration deadline, whichever occurs first. Be sure to remind volunteers that they must keep the drive nonpartisan.
7. Publicize your registration drive. You can use bulletin announcements (see samples on last pages), pulpit announcements, fliers, posters and other non-partisan materials.
8. Conduct the drive.
  - **Keep it nonpartisan! Absolutely no comments or suggestions should 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**

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<sup>3</sup> The Virginia Department of Elections certified training must be completed once per year and is valid until June 30 annually. The training can be completed online (recommended) or in-person.

**suggestions.** 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 provided by the USCCB or the Virginia Catholic Conference – should be distributed as part of the voter registration process. Again, 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 [General Registrar](#) or the [Virginia Department of Elections](#).
- Thank your volunteers and your pastor for their cooperation.

10. Get out the vote! On the weekend before the election, use USCCB [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 Registration Drive*

\_\_\_\_\_ 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. 16.) 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 Registration Drive*

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!**