

# Religious Groups and 501(c)3 Allowable Political Activity

Churches and other religious groups are allowed to get involved in politics, but must ensure that their political activity adheres to standards established by the IRS.

Given that the vast majority of most faith communities and faith-based organizational resources are not spent on influencing legislation, this is not a difficult standard to meet. Congregations and faith-based organizations can let their voices be heard while also paying thoughtful attention to ensuring that IRS guidelines are met.

## ALLOWABLE ACTIVITIES:

Addressing Moral/Political Issues: Religious groups, churches, and 501(c)3 organizations may speak out on political issues such as the death penalty, equality for all people, reproductive freedom, homelessness, etc.. and may also take stands and pass resolutions regarding a specific moral issue and communicate those views to the public and to politicians.

Voter Registration Drives: Religious groups, churches, and 501(c)3 organizations may register people to vote, conduct voter registration activities, and encourage people to go to the polls, provided that they do not benefit any particular candidate or political party and no bias is evident.

Candidate Forums: Religious groups, churches, and 501(c)3 organizations may hold forums in which all qualified candidates for public office are invited to speak and given an equal opportunity to present their views. Any questions asked must be non-partisan in nature and cover a broad range of issues.

## BALLOT INITIATIVES AND LOBBY ACTIVITIES

Religious groups, churches, and 501(c) 3 organizations may influence the passage of legislation so long as such efforts are not a "substantial part" of their activities. Legal interpretations of "substantial part" vary. Organizations could safely err on the side of caution, assuming that substantiality (including expenditures to advocate or oppose legislation ) is viewed as more than 5% of an organization's total budget.

Lobbying is defined as a communication that

1. States that the recipient should contact legislators or any government official involved in the formulation of legislation.
2. Gives the address and phone number or other contact information about the legislator or official.
3. Provides a petition, postcard, or similar material.

## OTHER ACTIVITIES ALLOWED

Advocating or commenting on legislation or a ballot initiative without a call to a specific action is not a lobbying communication.

For example, you can state the obvious harms/injustices of a ballot initiative and urge people to vote their consciences and support justice for all.

Personal opinions and stories about the issue, education about facts, and information about who the legislation would effect and how, are not considered direct lobbying activities as long as a specific action is not requested, such as a request to a constituent to contact a legislator, or to request a legislator to vote a specific way.

## **RELIGIOUS GROUPS AND POLITICAL ACTIVITY:**

### **DOs AND DON'Ts**

#### **DO:**

- Educate about the issues using personal stories, factual data, etc...
- Refer interested people to those groups that publish relevant Legislative Scorecards
- Speak Boldly and Publicly from your religious/spiritual perspective
- Help register voters

#### **DON'T**

- Endorse particular candidates running for public office
- Use organizational resources for running for or holding public office
- Register voters for only one party
- Distribute partisan campaign literature or partisan voter guides
- Spend a substantial part of your total budget on lobbying/legislative activities (The most cautious estimate is more than 5%)

**REMEMBER: You can be bold, you can speak out, you can be highly visible in educating about the issues and about the forms and harms of injustice!**

**For more information, contact:**

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