

AN ELECTION YEAR GUIDE FOR FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Faith communities can encourage their members to vote without endangering their tax-exempt status if they stick to nonpartisan activities. This guide outlines some of the things you are permitted to do and ways Democracy North Carolina can help.

ALLOWABLE ACTIVITIES

Churches and other faith-based organizations with tax-exempt status can sponsor a lot of election-related activities so long as they follow certain rules and avoid any mention of specific candidates or a political party. If you are thinking of a “Souls to the Polls” program for your church, here are some of the things that you can do:

- **Conduct a nonpartisan voter registration drive:** Obtain voter registration forms and instructions from your local Board of Elections or call us at 888-687-8683 for more information. All voter registration forms must be postmarked or turned into the Board of Elections at least 25 days before the election. *You may insert voter registration forms into your church program or hand them out at a service so long as you do not mention a specific political party or candidate.*
- **Educate voters:** If your community wants to educate a specific group about their voter rights, that’s okay. You just have to remain nonpartisan about it. For example, you might want to educate ex-felons on their right to vote or encourage young people to vote. You can also distribute materials to your congregation about the importance of voting. *Call us at 888-687-8683 for information on the support we offer for these types of efforts, including hand-outs on why people should vote.*
- **Join a local Get-Out-the-Vote (GOTV) coalition** and work with other non-profit groups to register voters or get them to the polls. Just remember: you must not ever work with a political party or a candidate’s campaign to get out the vote. Democracy North Carolina is working with non-profit coalitions in Charlotte, Fayetteville, Greensboro, Greenville, Salisbury, Wilson, Winston-Salem and other areas. *We can connect you to other groups getting out the vote in your area, ensuring you do not duplicate effort.*
- **Distribute flyers on Same Day Registration & Voting** to let members of your congregation know they can still register and vote on the same day, at an Early Voting Center, from 19 to 3 days before any Election. This helps people who missed the regular registration deadline. *Contact us for free Same Day Registration flyers to distribute. These are nonpartisan and can be distributed as part of your church services.*
- **Make it easier for your congregation to vote** by sponsoring special Early Voting gatherings on a Saturday or Sunday, giving voters rides to the polls and other activities. Just make sure these activities do not involve specific candidates or a political party. *Call us at 888-687-8386 for information on all of your GOTV options and how we can help.*

AT A GLANCE

| Activity by Religious Leader or House of Worship Members: | Permissible? | Role Dem-NC Can Play: |
|---|-------------------------------|--|
| Conduct nonpartisan voter registration | Yes | Provide forms and follow-up |
| Get out the vote in a nonpartisan way and hand out “Why Vote?” education | Yes | Provide you with materials and follow-up |
| Distribute nonpartisan voter guides that include all candidates | Yes | Help you obtain materials |
| Support/oppose legislation | Yes | Educate on pending legislation |
| Conduct an educational forum about politics, religion and social justice issues | Yes | Provide speakers and materials on important issues |
| Endorse or oppose political candidates | No | Can play no role |
| Host a forum open to all of the candidates in a race | Yes | Provide relevant questions to ask |
| Political fundraising | No | Can play no role |
| Link from your website to a campaign or party website | No | Can play no role |
| Contribute to political candidates or a political party | No | Can play no role |
| Contribute to a Political Action Committee | No | Can play no role |
| Offer candidates newsletters ads | Yes, if they pay market rates | Plays no role |

PLEASE NOTE:

As individuals, pastors and other religious leaders have a First Amendment right to back specific candidates, but they must never endorse a candidate in their official capacity as a church leader. They should be especially cautious if they are well-known and their endorsement could be viewed by the public as an endorsement by their church or their non-profit organization. In no case may a church leader promote a candidate or a political party from the pulpit or in any church materials, nor may they use any church resources — including buses — to benefit specific candidates or a party.

HOW DEMOCRACY NORTH CAROLINA CAN HELP

Promoting justice, compassion and equality are important goals shared by many religions today. These are also our goals. Let's work together to make them a reality in North Carolina.

Democracy North Carolina is a valuable resource for faith-based communities because we are a tax-exempt organization ourselves and do not coordinate with political candidates or parties. That means we can help you with your voter registration drives as well as voter education and get out the vote activities. In fact, right now, we are already working with many churches throughout the state on "Souls to the Polls" initiatives and we would be glad to work with your faith community as well.

Keep in mind that getting people to vote is just one of the things we do that may coincide with your faith community's goals.. For example, we promote campaign finance reform because we believe that when money from big donors dominates elections, the economically disadvantaged get shut out. We work hard to make sure ethical rules are in place to guide candidates and our government representatives because we do not want to see special interests gain advantages at the expense of the powerless. And we encourage people from under-represented groups to run for office because we believe they bring legislative issues to the table that can result in better housing, healthcare, environmental protection and education for us all.

If some of these same issues concern your congregation, we welcome your partnership. At Democracy North Carolina, we believe that working with faith communities will help us:

- End low voter turnout and motivate millions of more people to vote.
- Enact reforms that will keep special interests from shaping state laws.
- Pursue other reforms to make sure all people have an equal chance at being heard.
- Ensure that social and economic justice are served.

If you represent a faith community and would like to work with us, please call our Associate Director, Jenn Frye, at 1-888-687-8683, Ext. 15, or email her at jennfrye@democracy-nc.org.

