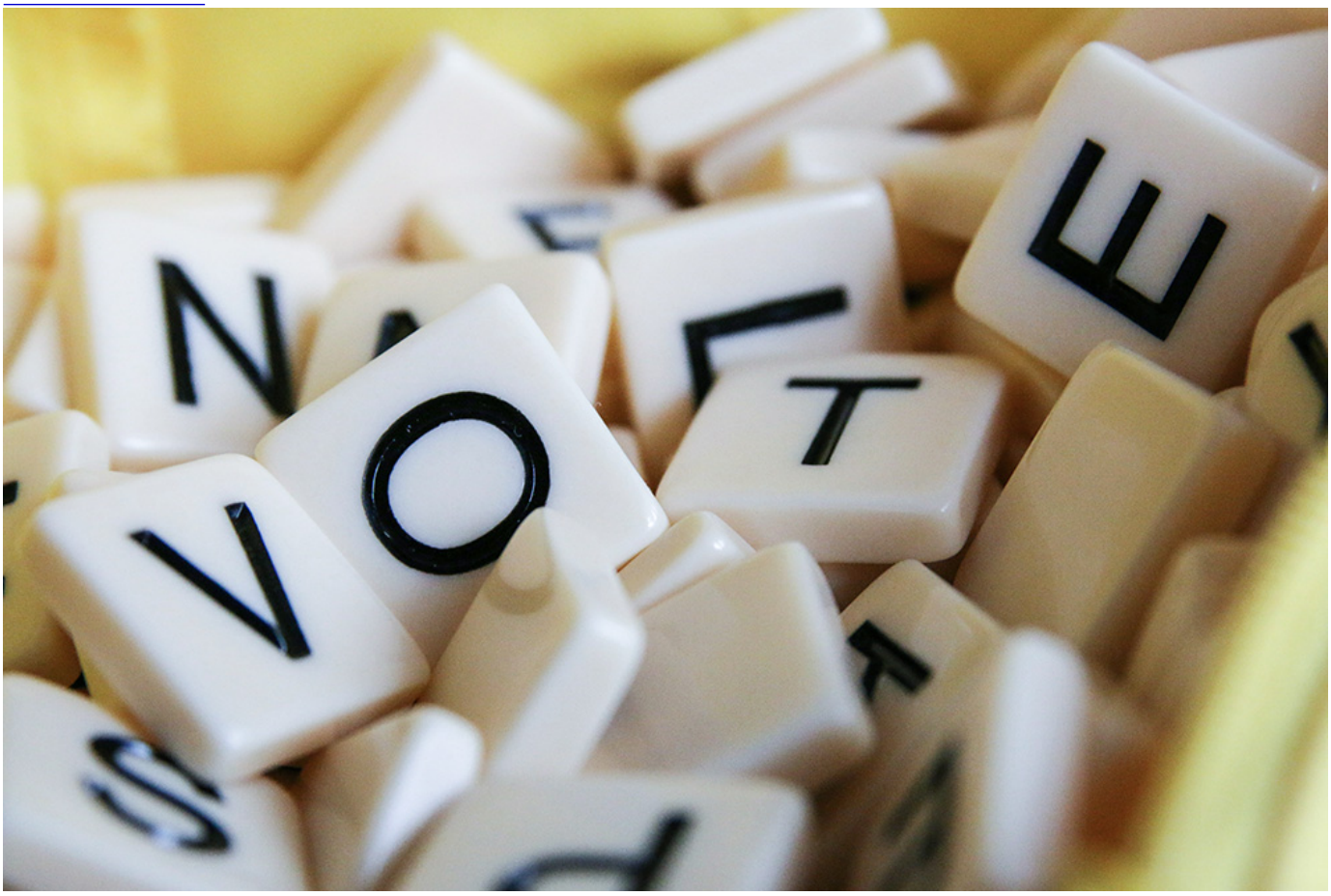
Opinion
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Few parishioners want to see their parishes turned into partisan battlefields, but with the Catholic community divided between Republicans (52%) and Democrats (44%), many parishes face this danger. Both campaigns are appealing to Catholic voters because shifting even a small percentage of Catholics in key swing states like Pennsylvania could determine the outcome of the presidential election.

A recent poll sponsored by the National Catholic Reporter has former President Donald Trump leading Vice President Kamala Harris among Catholic voters in battleground states by 5 percentage points (50% to 45%).

But unlike earlier elections, this year Republicans are not staking their Catholic appeal on abortion, because they see it as a negative issue for them. Instead, they are attacking Democrats on transgender issues. Republicans are also trying to paint the Democrats as anti-Catholic.

Related: Catholics could decide the 2024 election

Meanwhile, Democrats are waffling on immigration. Instead, they are portraying Trump as a threat to democracy. Without a Catholic at the top of the ticket this year, Democrats have a harder time defending themselves against accusations of anti-Catholicism, although often the party's disagreements over policy are more with the bishops than with the Catholic people.

It is good to remember the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has been both critical and supportive of the Trump and Biden administrations on public policy.

A few priests enjoy pontificating on politics from the pulpit, but they tend to be the exception. The natural response of a Catholic pastor is to hide in the rectory basement and wait for the election to pass. In 2020, Catholics were less likely to hear about the election in sermons than any other denomination, according to the Pew Research Center.

Other than hiding in the basement, what can pastors do to keep their parishes from turning into partisan war zones?

First, avoid politics in your sermons.

According to the Pew Research Center, 76% of Catholics do not want to hear partisan endorsements from the pulpit. Only 53% say they share the opinions of their clergy when politics are discussed, the lowest number for any denomination.

If you want to avoid trouble, never mention the candidates' names, never mention a political party. It is appropriate to encourage people to vote and to talk about issues, but don't let your parishioners know how you are going to vote.

And if you preach on issues, preach on the full spectrum of Catholic social teaching, not on just a single issue. If all you preach on is capital punishment, you are signaling your support for the Democrats. If all you preach on is abortion, you are signaling your support for Republicans.

Second, keep partisan politics out of the parish bulletin and the parish website.

In the run-up to the election, only use material from the U.S. bishops' conference or from your state Catholic conference. Provide quotes from and links to "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," *Laudato Si'*, *Fratelli Tutti* and other official documents, but not material from other groups no matter how "Catholic" they claim to be.

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The bishops' conference has produced six one-page bulletin inserts for parishes, which are useful at any time but especially prior to the election.

Do not let any other organization, not even pro-life or social justice groups, have space in your bulletin or website prior to the election.

If it comes from the bishops, you are probably safe, but if it comes from anyone else, watch out.

Third, train the ushers to protect the church from partisan materials.

Tell the ushers to keep an eye out for leaflets and other political materials in the back of the church. It is easy for someone to put a pile of flyers on a table in the back of the church, which your parishioners will think came from you or your bishop. Tell the ushers to confiscate any material you have not personally approved.

The church building is private property, and you have the right to exclude anyone who is invading your space with politics.

Fourth, appoint people to keep an eye on the parking lot.

Political campaigns target church parking lots by putting flyers on windshields. Again, the parking lot is private property. Your delegates should tell them they are trespassing and should leave. The pamphlets should be removed before people get to their cars at the end of Mass.

You cannot stop people from distributing material on the public sidewalk, but church property should be a politics-free zone.

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Fifth, review the U.S. bishops' "Do's and Don'ts Guidelines During Election Season" to see what is possible and what is to be avoided.

For example, it states parishes can:

- Address the moral and human dimensions of public issues.
- Share church teaching on human life, human rights, and justice and peace.
- Apply Catholic values to legislation and public issues.
- Conduct a nonpartisan voter registration drive on church property.

- Distribute unbiased candidate questionnaires covering issues of human life, justice and peace that have been reviewed and approved by your diocesan attorney.
- Check with your diocesan attorney if you have any questions about what is appropriate.

The guidelines warn parishes not to:

- Endorse or oppose candidates for political office.
- Distribute partisan campaign literature under church auspices.
- Arrange for groups to work for a candidate for public office.
- Invite only selected candidates to address your church-sponsored group.
- Conduct voter registration slanted toward one party.
- Distribute a biased candidate survey.

It also recommends including the following announcement in parish bulletins and websites:

> We strongly urge all parishioners to register, to become informed on key issues, and to vote. The Church does not support or oppose any candidate, but seeks to focus attention on the moral and human dimensions of issues. We do not authorize the distribution of partisan political materials on parish property.

Most parishioners hope politics do not invade their parishes, but the wise pastor prepares for the worst. Following this simple checklist will help parishes avoid trouble at election time. If you have a wise pastor, compliment him. If you do not, complain.

Author's note: *This is an update of my 2020 column "Election checklist: Five ways Catholic parishes can keep politics out of church."*

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.