Editorial: Keep politics out of the pulpit

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Under federal law, it is illegal for churches and other so-called 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations to "participate in, or intervene in … any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office." But in recent years the Internal Revenue Service has failed to aggressively enforce the law, despite open defiance by religious groups that believe — erroneously — that they have a 1st Amendment right to endorse candidates without losing their tax-exempt status.

That soon may change. The Freedom From Religion Foundation, which had sued the IRS seeking to require it to enforce the law, says it has reached an agreement with the IRS under which the agency has adopted procedures for "reviewing, evaluating and determining whether to initiate church investigations."

IRS investigation of political activity by nonprofits has been complicated by allegations that the agency improperly targeted tea party and other conservative groups that sought tax exemptions; those allegations are the subject of a congressional probe. But that is no reason for the agency to stall on scrutinizing politicking by churches.

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