



A Nonprofit's Guide to Hosting a Candidate Forum

Script to Online Guide

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Hello, and welcome to "Hosting a Candidate Forum", a presentation of the Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network – an organization that connects nonprofits with tools and resources to help their communities vote. This powerpoint will guide your organization through the steps of planning and hosting an event that brings together your constituents and candidates in a positive and productive way, while staying neutral and nonpartisan.

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[Introduction –Table of contents.]

To begin, we'll talk a little about what exactly a candidate forum is and why hosting one is a good idea.

A candidate forum is an event at which voters have **a unique opportunity** to hear from and speak with candidates on the issues that matter to them. These events can take any one of a variety of formats, ranging from direct questions and answers to a prepared debate. The purpose of the forum is to **educate candidates for office on the concerns of your community**, as well as for your constituents to **learn where the candidates stand** on these concerns.

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Nonprofit organizations are natural hosts for candidate forums, because they are already considered to be **neutral brokers operating with the best interest of the community in mind**. A forum can also **be a policy tool**, helping to build **greater awareness on the issues** that matter to your nonprofit and connect you with future elected officials. They give your community a chance to **learn more about the candidates** and **get involved with the election**.

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Good planning is the key to a successful forum. This presentation will guide you through the steps your organization should take when preparing to host a candidate event. Here's an outline of the topics we'll cover:

- Keeping your forum nonpartisan
- Encouraging candidates to attend.
- Selecting a format
- Getting publicity and turnout
- Finding co-sponsors
- A To-do List on a deadline
- And where to go for more

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The first thing we'll discuss today is keeping your forum nonpartisan.

Candidate forums where all candidates are invited are, by their nature, nonpartisan events. It is what the candidates and the audience expects. This is why it makes sense for a nonprofit like yours, who must be nonpartisan, to sponsor them.

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Let's review the basic guidelines suggested by the IRS and League of Women Voters to be nonpartisan while planning and conducting your forum.

The first is that the candidates should be discussing a **broad range of issues**; or, if the forum has a theme, a range of concerns within that topic

The second is that each candidate should be given **equal time to present his or her view** on the issues discussed.

The next rule is "**no litmus tests**". This means that the candidates are not asked to simply agree or disagree with any of the specific positions of the sponsoring organizations.

Finally, the **moderator of the forum needs to stay neutral**. Simply put, this means the person administering the questions cannot imply approval or disapproval of the candidates or their responses.

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When inviting candidates to your forum, you must **invite all viable candidates** for a specific office. You should also **equally encourage** each of them to attend.

Make sure to **confirm with your candidates** that they are coming. This is critical! As a general rule, at least *two* candidates must confirm to be a forum.

But what if a candidate cancels at the last minute - or simply doesn't show up? You may go forward with the event as planned, even with only one candidate. However, in this case, be extra careful to announce that this in no way signifies the endorsement of the attending candidate by your organization.

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[DURING THE FORUM]

Your forum should **avoid any leading questions** that point to a desired answer from candidates. It's ok to ask straightforward questions on the issues; however, make sure to strive for balance.

Along with your organization's nonpartisanship, your audience needs to maintain an **overall level of neutrality** as well. At the beginning, ask audience members to leave their partisan materials at the door. This means no partisan buttons or signs. You should also ask the audience to be respectful. Refrain from excessive exuberance for or against a particular candidate. This helps to create a sense of unity and nonpartisanship within the forum hall.

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Next, we're going to talk about how to make sure candidates attend your event. After all, what's a forum without the candidates!

Candidates are spread very thin during a campaign season. They cannot attend every event to which they are invited. The best way to encourage candidates to attend is to give them an incentive to be there. Make it worth their while, and they *will* show up. The question is: what do the candidates want?

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The first thing that attracts candidates is the promise of a large audience.

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You and your co-sponsoring organizations should focus on turnout to increase the chances that candidates will attend. Be sure to communicate your expected audience size to the candidates in advance. A large turnout at your candidate forum demonstrates that your organization's supporters represent a real voting bloc.

A guarantee of neutrality is also very important. Candidates will avoid events they believe doesn't provide a fair setting, —especially if the media might be there. In all of your communications with the candidates, remind them of the nonpartisan nature of the forum and share any ground rules you have.

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Trusted and well-respected nonprofits, that are located in or serve people in their district, will attract candidates as well. Candidates are aware of nonprofits that have held successful and neutral candidate forums in the past and will be more likely to attend if those organizations are involved.

Candidates also appreciate time to meet informally with voters. Schedule time after the forum for the candidates to speak one-on-one with voters and shake hands. Tell candidates about this opportunity in your invitation to them.

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One of the first things on your to-do list should be selecting the format of your forum. We will discuss the most common formats of candidate forums – Question and answer, debate, and town hall.

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In an Equal Time Q & A format, an impartial moderator or panel question the candidates, who are allowed equal response time. Traditionally, the candidates are

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unaware of the exact questions but know the established focus of the program. Candidates may answer the same questions or may be asked different questions, as long as each is given equal time to present their point of view.

In a Follow-Up Q & A approach, the moderator or panelists ask the candidates questions. To avoid evasive answers to the original question, follow-up questions are permitted. Follow-up questions by opponents force candidates to provide more specific exact answers.

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In prepared and spontaneous debate, the candidates are presented ahead of time with several prepared questions. A selection of these questions will be asked at the forum. Candidates will then be asked to give spontaneous answers to questions that originate with the moderator, their opponents and/or the audience.

With **candidate debate**, the moderator asks a question, and the candidates discuss the issue. It is imperative to have the moderator control candidates who try to dominate the discussion. A strong nonpartisan moderator is a must for this forum design.

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In a **town meeting style**, members of the audience ask all the questions. It is recommended that questions be screened by a staff member of your organization in order to avoid partisan questions and to facilitate constructive dialogue. The audience members asking questions will educate the candidate on the concerns of the constituency.

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With any of these options, consider adding an **informal question & answer session** at the end of the formal proceedings.

As long as you follow the guidelines of nonpartisanship, you don't need to limit your candidate event to the formats outlined above. One nonprofit did a karaoke session at a bar with the candidates. Each candidate sang a song, which was followed by 3–5 minutes to address the audience and a chance to mingle afterward.

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High attendance is a must for any successful candidate forum.
Promoting your event draws a crowd and raises the profile of your nonprofit.
Spending time to organize turnout is the key to a large audience.

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Your communications and media play a critical role in the success of your forum. These help **to bring people to your forum** and make candidates take the forum more seriously.

Your communications and media contacts get you publicity and raise awareness of the election and the candidate's positions. It also **makes your organization a source for future stories** about the impact of elections on your neighborhood.

Work with whoever does your communications **to use all your communication vehicles** and media contacts. Choose local media outlets that cover politics.

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It's a good strategy to find a media partner, such as a radio station popular with your audience, a local newspaper or even a cable or television outlet. Media partners **broaden your audience** and **guarantee coverage of the event**.

Another publicizing idea is **to consider asking a well known personality**, like a local anchor or reporter, to facilitate the forum. If your forum uses a panel to ask questions, they can be a draw too.

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Organizing turnout for a candidate forum is no different than for a meeting, rally or other event.

Start by **targeting your audiences**. For example, you can focus on your constituents, your staff, or your local community. **Create and follow a turnout plan**. Think about: who will help with turnout? How will you reach your audiences? **Start your turnout plan early**, and intensify your efforts in the month before the forum.

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Having co-sponsors is another effective way to make your forum a success.

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Many organizations choose to collaborate with other nonprofits, pooling resources and staff to make sure the event can be as large as possible. Here are a few sources of partnerships.

1. Other agencies and nonprofits in your neighborhood

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2. **Nonpartisan organizations** known for sponsoring candidate events such as the League of Women Voters, NAACP or a state nonprofit association
3. **Issue groups**, such as those focusing on the arts, environment, or human services.
4. **Local churches**, synagogues, mosques or other faith communities, many of which have a community outreach committee

Whomever you choose, make sure you reach out to them as early as possible to ensure a productive collaboration.

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On our website, you can find our one page Checklist for Candidate Forums.

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This is your “To Do List on a Timeline”, which lists what to do in each of the 4 months leading up to the forum, as well as on the big day. You can view or print this in the “Find Resources” section of our website under checklists and fact sheets. Topics include **finding partners, setting the date and choosing the place, inviting candidates, and starting your publicity and turnout strategies.**

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Well, we’ve given you a lot of information! The three most important things to remember in organizing your candidate event are to:

1. **Start planning early**
2. **Publicize your forum, and**
3. **Organize your turnout**

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Finally, here are some places to go for more information.

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We encourage you to browse through our online guide to hosting a candidate forum. You can also print out our Candidate Forum month-by-month checklist, or download our full-length guide in pdf form, www.nonprofitvote.org.

The candidate forum section of our website has useful links to candidate forum guides from the League of Women Voters, Parent Teacher Association and more.

This concludes our presentation of “Hosting a Candidate Forum”, a guide for 501c3 nonprofit organizations. Thank you for tuning in.

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