

# A GUIDE TO CANDIDATE FORUMS

FOR LOCAL LEAGUES

*revised 2003*

*League of Women Voters of Texas Education Fund*



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# LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF TEXAS

## GUIDE TO CANDIDATES FORUMS

### *Non-Partisanship Policy*

The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan organization that works to promote political responsibility through active, informed participation of all citizens in their government. Neither the League nor the LWV Education Fund supports or opposes any political party or candidate.

### *Purpose and Goals*

Candidates forums and debates are important venues for furthering the League's mission to promote the informed and active participation of citizens in their government. Forums sponsored by the LWV, or in which the LWV participates, must be nonpartisan and must ensure that all participating candidates will be treated fairly and equally. All viable candidates on the ballot for the races included in the forum **must** be invited to participate, and the forum/debate must include at least two candidates.

The main goal is citizen education. The program may address, but not be limited to, issues considered to be of important educational interest to the League and any cosponsoring organizations. Issues of interest to the general public must be included.

This publication will address procedures for **forums**: the planning, format and procedures. We define a forum as a live public meeting in which all the candidates for one or more offices present their views in short individual speeches, and then answer questions from the audience. More pertinent information about candidate debates can be found in the LWVUS publication *Face to Face: A Guide to Candidate Debates* (1996, LWVEF, pub. 830.) This publication can be downloaded on the website, [www.lwv.org](http://www.lwv.org).

### **Part 1 – Planning the Forum**

**1. Set the date:** Choose a date after the filing deadline and before early voting starts, if it is scheduled in your area, or before the election. These dates can be found on the Secretary of State's website, [www.sos.state.tx.us](http://www.sos.state.tx.us). If the forum will be taped for delayed broadcast, allow time for it to be shown before the election. Consider other events in the community which may compete for attendance.

**2. Choose a place:** The forum **must** be a meeting open to the public, so choose a place that will not seem to exclude some potential audience. Check into the availability of appropriate places keeping in mind the expected attendance, need for microphones or media equipment, and an appropriate staging area for the candidates and moderator. Check policies for food or beverages if you plan to have them available.

**3. Consider working with a cosponsoring organization:** If you decide to work with a cosponsoring organization, they must understand that the League cannot waive any of its nonpartisan policies and procedures. Cosponsors cannot have endorsed or be affiliated with a candidate or ballot issue. A cosponsor must be approved by the League Board of Directors.

The League should take the lead in contacting the candidates, negotiating disputes, and controlling the format. The League should provide the moderator and timekeeper, or should approve of them in advance. Cosponsors may participate in the planning, help with finding facilities, obtaining TV or cable coverage, and providing publicity, volunteers and refreshments. They can publicize the event in their newsletters and encourage attendance. Monetary donations may be accepted, but are not required. Consider delineating the responsibilities in writing in advance with the cosponsoring organization(s).

Some groups that would be **good cosponsors** include, but are not limited to, the AARP, AAUW, Chamber of Commerce, PTA, neighborhood associations, law enforcement associations, civic clubs and organizations, environmental organizations and garden clubs.

In order to protect our nonpartisanship, some organizations **should not be asked to cosponsor**. These include, but are not limited to, political parties and political women's organizations because they have a vested interest in their candidates. It would be allowable to use them in a nonpartisan election, such as city council or school board elections, but even then the League needs to avoid being linked with any one party. Any group whose leadership has made public statements for or against any candidate, or which is known to support a candidate informally, or that advocates for an issue which is on the ballot, should not be asked to cosponsor.

**4. Fund your Forum:** Candidates forums or debates, or public educational forums on public policy issues or ballot issues, are educational and do not advocate for a certain candidate or issue. Therefore local Leagues are eligible to use money held in their account of the League of Women Voters of Texas Education Fund. However the local League must obtain the approval of the TEF trustees **prior to initiation** of the project. Forms and guidelines for applying for the funds may be found in the *Handbook for Local League TEF Projects*, (2002, LWVTEF). Other money from each League's general fund may also be used, as well as donations from cosponsoring organizations. Do not take or solicit donations from candidates or political parties. Do not sell ads for candidates or issues in any handouts or newsletters.

**5. Determine which races will be invited to participate:** All of the candidates for the same office in the same district should be invited, if it is feasible. Make candidate selection decisions in a clear, fair and reasonable way, using selection criteria established in advance. It is also helpful to have criteria in place to deal with unexpected situations, such as last minute write-in candidates.

Consider how many races will be on the ballot in your area, and how many candidates are running. Then add the introductory statements from each candidate (often 3-5 minutes), and the closing statement (1-2 minutes), to the time for questions for each office. The running time for the whole forum ought not to exceed 2 hours. You will then find that you may not be able to ask every office on the ballot to participate.

Some Leagues give more questioning time to the higher offices; some do not include the Justices of the Peace and Constables, or just give them time for a short speech. For Primary elections, candidates running in different party primaries may be asked to appear in different forums, or they may be included in the same forum.

**An important policy is that only the qualified candidates should be allowed to participate, and no substitutes or stand-ins should be allowed to speak for a candidate.** This policy should be stated in the letter of invitation to the candidates. The only possible exception might be the death of a candidate after filing and before the election, when the name will still appear on the ballot. The stand-in could then explain what a vote for the deceased candidate would mean, but would not participate in the question/answer period. For further guidelines concerning debate participants, refer to the LWVUS publication, *Face to Face: A Guide to Candidate Debates*.

**6. Consider taping or televising the forum:** Check with your local television or cable company to determine if they would like to broadcast the forum live, or to tape it for delayed broadcast. Many cities now film their council meetings for broadcast on community access cable channels, and they might work with you on a forum. Colleges have media programs, and might be willing to work with you. The goal is to reach as many potential voters as possible, so rebroadcast times should be advertised

If a tape is made, no part of a candidate's remarks should be edited, similarly to our Voters Guide policy. If the tape needs to be shortened for broadcast, League members should work with the film editor to make sure only non-essential portions are edited out.

## **Part 2 - Preparing for the Forum**

**1. Obtaining names of the Candidates:** The names and contact information of all candidates should be obtained, following the filing deadline, from the public official in charge of filing for the election. The following list shows those contacts:

**a) Primary elections** – contact the county offices of the Republican and Democratic parties, and any minor party currently recognized by the Secretary of State (currently only the Libertarian Party.) All statewide offices must file with the state party, as well as certain non-statewide offices such as U.S. Representative, member of State Board of Education, District Appeals Courts Justices, and District Judges and District Attorneys, unless their district is composed of only one county. However most county party officials should have information on those candidates who will be on the local ballot.

**b) General elections** – contact the Secretary of State for statewide offices, and the local Elections Administrator or County Clerk for local offices.

**c) City elections** – contact the City Clerk.

**d) School Board elections** – contact the school district administration office.

**e) Other Boards and Districts** – contact their administration office.

**2. Inviting the Candidates** - The candidates should receive a **written invitation**, signed by the president of the League or organization, which includes the following information:

- 1) Date, Time, and place of the forum
- 2) Purpose of the meeting
- 3) Offices to be included
- 4) The names of participating organizations, if any others
- 5) The format, including length of opening and closing statements, and the time allotments for questions and answers
- 6) Information on when to arrive and who to check in with when they arrive
- 7) Rules on substitution (some policies might allow a substitute to make an opening statement, but not to answer questions)
- 8) Information about whether the forum will be televised or taped
- 9) Notice that campaign literature cannot be distributed inside the meeting room, but may be placed outside the room
- 10) A reply form, or information about where to reply and the deadline

**3. Other invitations** – Members of the press should be invited to cover the event. Sometimes panelists may be invited to question the candidates, but they must have no previous relationship with any of the candidates. Current elected officials may be invited, as a courtesy, as well as city or school administrators.

**4. Appoint Forum Officials** – Appoint a Moderator, Timekeeper, Question Screener (if written questions are submitted from the audience), Question collectors and/or Ushers.

**a) Moderator** – The moderator should be thoroughly familiar with LWV policies, principles, non-partisanship, and the objectivity of our voter service activities. Voters service does not work to promote League program efforts. Candidate forums must be objective, impartial, and unbiased. The moderator’s political views and positions should be generally unknown in order to avoid any appearance of bias or partisanship. The moderator should not be identified as a member of a political party or a friend of one or more of the candidates. A member of a neighboring League might be asked to serve as moderator, or even a non-League member.

**b) Timekeeper** – The timekeeper should keep accurate time with a stopwatch, and should know how to use it.

c) **Question Screener** – One or more persons should be appointed to screen written questions from the audience. The questions should be screened for personal attacks or other inappropriate language, and several similar questions may be combined. They should be grouped so questions covering a range of topics may be covered. Therefore the screener should have a working knowledge of the issues pertaining to the election. The screener may write reserve questions to be used if the audience does not submit enough questions to fill the time allotted. After screening, the questions are then given to the moderator to be read to the candidates.

d) **Question collectors/Ushers** – These members should be placed around the meeting room and will direct people to open seats, pass out question forms, and collect them from the audience during the forum.

**5. Publicity and other printed material** – Arrange publicity through print and other media, including public service announcements on radio, television/cable. Put announcements in newsletters, Voters, and Voters Guides.

Printed programs may be distributed to the audience, which show the offices included and the names of the candidates, the format, the moderator's name, the League's contact information, president and voter service chair, the election date and early voting dates, and the dates of rebroadcast of a taped forum, if available. Include the League's non-partisanship policy if possible.

Print nameplates showing the candidate's name and office sought to place in front of the candidates while they are in front of the audience. Print signs such as "Candidates Forum Here Tonight" for the front of the hall. Consider banners for the hall, and posters to place in area businesses or public places.

Have Voters Guides and other League publications available during the forum, but avoid any publication that advocates for a certain position. Facts and Issues are acceptable as they are not advocacy papers.

**6. Visit the site** – Several days before the event visit the site to determine the staging. Check the availability of a podium or lectern for the moderator, and tables for the candidates. Determine the arrangement of the candidates, and the placement of panelists, if used, and the question screener. Consider whether the audio is sufficient: several microphones are preferable to using just one. Determine whether the seats for the audience will have to be arranged just prior to the event. If it will be taped, consider where the camera will be placed. Make sure the backdrop is pleasing and appropriate. Check the location of light switches and heater/air conditioner thermostat or fans. Arrange for a table outside the meeting room for the candidates' campaign literature, as well as League literature. Check the availability of restrooms and fire exits.

On the day of the event, arrive 30 minutes to one hour early to make final placement of all of the above, and to place the literature, the candidates' name signs, any banners or posters, and the video camera and microphones.

### **Part 3 – Managing the Forum**

**1. The Forum Coordinator** should arrive early to do the final set up, and to place water, paper and pencils, and name plates at the candidates' table. Designate a person to greet the candidates as they arrive, check them off a list, and make final explanation of the format for the evening. Have question forms for the audience, and runners to pass them out and take them to the screener or moderator. During the event, watch to make sure everything is running smoothly.

**2. An Opening Speech** should be made by the League President, Forum Coordinator or the Moderator, welcoming the audience and candidates and explaining the purpose of the event. The League non-partisanship policy should be read or summarized, as well as the objectivity of voter service. A statement of the importance of voting and participating in government and be included.

**3. The Moderator** should make an opening speech explaining the format, time limits of speeches and answers, the questioning procedure, including how and why the screening procedure functions. Introduce the timekeeper, explain the time limits of the speeches and how the candidates will be signaled, and the time limits of the question and answer periods.

As the Moderator introduces each group of candidates, she can explain the duties of the office, salaries, and term, if these are not available in printed form. She should be familiar with the candidates' names, party affiliations, and the order in which they will be seated. She should be aware of any hot issues which might cause difficulty. The Moderator must maintain proper decorum in dress and facial expression, and should not become nervous, angry, rude, or overly casual. Humor often diffuses a tense situation.

**4. The Timekeeper** should arrive early, with a stopwatch and some device for signaling the candidates as to their time limits. One method is to use colored cards, such as yellow for "x number of seconds left," and red for "time is up." A bell, gong or gavel may be used but these are more disruptive. Establish with the moderator a procedure for handling "over-run" statements by the candidates. Sit on the front row so the candidates and moderator and easily see you.

**5. The Candidates' opening statements** should be short, either 3, 4, or 5 minutes. They have been notified in advance so should be prepared. The Moderator should have a system of determining the order, such as alphabetic or ballot order.

**6. A question and answer period** will follow the opening statements for one office, and will occur in a preset amount of time. Candidate's responses should be timed and can usually be limited to one minute. Questions should be directed to a place, or all candidates, but not to an individual. The format can be either with oral or written questions. The pros and cons of each method will be discussed, but on the whole, using written questions provides much more control and allows a broader range of questions.

**a) Oral questions** allow the questioner to have a spotlight, but there are several drawbacks to this format: The questioner may ramble or attempt to make a speech, may use the question to personally attack a candidate, or may ask a question that does not really pertain to the office. Often a certain question triggers similar questions in the audience's mind, limiting time to explore other areas of interest. Sometimes one questioner may dominate as others in the audience defer to him. It can sometimes be hard to hear the questioner, or to understand his point.

**b) Written questions** from the audience have several advantages: The audience has time to think of good questions, and to craft them in writing. A range of interests is often reflected in the questions. Questions that are personal or that don't pertain to the office can be eliminated by the screening committee. Questions that are poorly written can be more carefully phrased. Questions that are similar or are about the same subject can be grouped by the screener so that the subject is covered in one or two questions, leaving more time for other questions.

The main drawback to this method is that often there are more questions than can be covered in the designated time period for the questions. The screener can help here by sending the most important questions to the moderator first. Another problem is that the audience may feel less involved in the process. But generally this method produces an orderly and successful forum.

At the end of the question period, allow each candidate to make a closing statement of no more than one minute, so they may correct any misimpression or thank the audience. Then proceed to the next office to be covered, if any.

**7. Closing announcements** should be made by the League president or the moderator. Thank the audience for their attendance and participation, remind them of Voters Guide availability and/or publication date, early voting dates, dates of delayed broadcast if any.

#### **Part 4 – Assessment**

With the Board and forum workers, conduct an assessment of how the forum worked, and write down what should be changed in the future. Then send thank-you notes to the candidates for appearing and for running for office.

