



League of Women Voters of New Mexico

Policy on Candidate Forums (Adopted March 19, 2011)

The League enables all candidates running for elected office to meet constituents in public forums moderated by the League, and to have an equal and fair opportunity to respond to questions submitted by the forum attendees.

The purpose of this policy is to document the criteria and parameters for conducting Candidate Forums within the State of New Mexico. “Candidate Forums” in this context refers to a gathering of candidates, whether or not affiliated with any specific party, that are running for one or more of the elective offices that are the focus of the forum. “Candidate Forums” in this context does NOT refer to one-on-one debates between two candidates of opposing parties. If such debates are conducted under League moderation, then the guidelines of the LWVEF publication “Face to Face: A Guide to Candidate Debates” shall be followed.

Generally, Leagues within the State of New Mexico do not conduct one-on-one candidates’ debates. More often, a group of candidates—for example, all the candidates running for state representative in several, geographically close, districts—are invited to a forum.

Preparations and invitations: The League (and its partners, if any) sponsoring the forum designates a committee to handle the details of the forum, and designates a League member or partner as the moderator for the forum. The Forum Committee and the Moderator develop guidelines for the conduct of the forum. Candidates are invited via a letter or an email (not by phone) that includes the guidelines for the conduct of the forum and information about restrictions on the conduct of the candidates, such as placement of campaign literature. The letter of invitation makes clear that the candidates’ acceptance of the invitation also indicates that they are accepting the guidelines for the conduct of the forum. The forum is advertised within the local communities to attract potential voters.

Opening statements and remarks: At the forum, the candidates are individually welcomed by the moderator and/or members of the Forum Committee. During her opening remarks, the moderator explains the adopted guidelines to the audience and may mention that the candidates have agreed to the guidelines. The candidates are then asked to make brief, introductory remarks about themselves and their candidacy. These remarks are timed, and each candidate is allocated the same amount of time, usually from 1-4 minutes, depending on the number of candidates present and the length of time allocated to the forum.

The Forum Committee may compose one or at most two introductory questions for the candidates. However, this is not necessary.

Questions from the audience: Leagues may choose among several options for conducting the question and answer portion of the forum. Audience size or composition may make it necessary to have some control over the questions. The League may allow questions directly from the audience, or may ask that questions from the audience be submitted in writing before or during the forum. The latter option allows the League to review the questions for repetition, clarity and appropriateness.

A proven method for receiving questions from the audience is to distribute 3x5 cards and pencils at the entrance to the forum room. The moderator explains the use of the cards. The index cards are collected, reviewed and consolidated by League members and partners to ensure that the questions are neither offensive nor repetitive and cover a fairly broad spectrum of subject matter. If a major topic of local interest is not covered by any of the submitted questions, the question reviewers may compose a question on that topic. Questions addressed to a single candidate are permissible provided that the moderator invites all candidates to address such questions. The questions are then passed to the moderator, who presents those questions deemed to be of general interest and asks each candidate to respond. The candidates' responses are timed. Every effort is made to stay within the advertised duration of the forum.

If not all candidates can attend: It is always a problem when not all candidates for an office can attend. The options reflect the nature of the office and the field of candidates. "Single office" refers to a unique position, such as Congressperson from a given district, governor, or county clerk. "Same or similar office" refers to the election of multiple representatives, whether districted or not, to a body such as school board, county commission, or state House of Representatives.

- When only two or three candidates are running for a single major office, such as U.S. Senator or mayor, the date of the forum should be set after consulting with them and the forum should not held at all if not all can attend.
- When multiple candidates are running for the same or similar office, they may or may not be directly opposed but the issues are generally the same for all the candidates. Assuming that at least two candidates will be on stage together, it is permissible to
 - hold the forum with two or more of the group present,
 - allow all candidates present to participate in the question and answer portion of the forum, whether or not opposition exists or is present,
 - allow opening statements to be read for absent candidates by the moderator (**not** by their campaign managers, spouses, or anyone else).
- In some cases, if time permits, unopposed candidates for single local offices may be allowed to make statements in the interest of introducing themselves and educating the audience about the position. In general no time is allocated for audience questions and answers.

Closing statements: Closing statements are optional, and are omitted more often than not.

Within a few days after the forum, the Forum Committee, including the Moderator, conducts a debrief meeting to review the event and determine what changes to the procedure or the venue arrangements, if any, should be made for future forums. The results of the debrief meeting are documented and kept in the Voter Services files.

Appendix: Sample Script

Welcome to the _____ Candidates Forum, co-sponsored by the League of Women Voters of _____ and AAUW. I'm _____, President of _____.

The League's mission is to enable voters to make an educated decision on Election Day. Both the LWV and the AAUW are non-partisan organizations. If you would like to learn more or join either of these organizations, please look for the brochures near the door.

Thank you all for being here. Before we begin, I ask you to please remain as quiet as possible so that everyone may hear. Please hold your applause until the forum has ended so that the candidates will have all the time possible for getting their points across. Please turn off cell phones and pagers.

Thank you to _____ for hosting this event, and thanks to the many individuals who helped put on this forum. I want to give a special thanks to our Voter Services Chair _____ and assistant _____ for their work on this year's Voters' Guide and the candidate forums.

This forum is being recorded by KSFR Radio, which will be playing excerpts before the election.

Thank you for so much for coming out this evening. This YOUR forum, your opportunity to get to know the candidates and hear their perspectives on important issues. There is never enough time to cover all the issues in a setting such as this, but with good questions we will learn a great deal about the candidates who are running for office. If you have a question to ask, please print it clearly on a 3"x 5" card. Please raise your hand for the question screeners _____ and _____ (*indicate these individuals*) if you have a card to submit or if you need another card. You are welcome to submit as many questions as you would like, but please use a separate 3 x 5 card for each question.

Each candidate will have up to two minutes to respond to each question. When 30 seconds remain of this time, our timekeeper _____ will raise a sign (*timekeeper demonstrates.*) At the end of two minutes, she will put up the STOP sign.

We may be grouping and prioritizing your questions during the forum. If your questions are not addressed, feel free to contact candidates directly after the forum or at another time.

Each candidate will have three minutes for an introductory statement. The order of these initial statements was determined by lot. The first statement will be made by Mr. _____ running for District _____.

Introduce the remaining candidates for their turns.

Now read the first question, calling on the first candidate by name. When his time is up, proceed to the next candidate, by name, without repeating the question or making any comment.

Carry on through the questions, reminding the audience from time to time that they may submit additional question. Vary the order in which the candidates are asked to respond to each question.

Allow enough time for concluding statements and announcements.

This is our last question before the candidates make their closing statements. Thank you for your questions. We are sorry we could not get to all of them, so please if your questions have not been answered, speak with the candidates directly after the forum. We will now move to closing statements.

The candidates will have 2 minutes each to summarize their qualifications and positions. (*Reverse the order used in the opening statements.*)

Let's give a round of applause to our candidates for participating in this interesting and lively forum and, most of all, for their willingness to serve the public. (*Applause.*)

Thank you, Candidates, for your willingness to participate in the democratic process by running for office.

Please remember to look for the Voters' Guide, which will be published on _____ *date* in _____ *publication*. There will be copies of the guides at the libraries, recreational centers, County Clerk's office, and _____. You can consult our website www.lwy....org for more information on this election. And remember to vote on _____ *date of Election Day* or by absentee or early voting. Polling locations and other important voting information is in the Voters' Guide.

Thank you again for coming this evening and being part of our democracy. Good evening!