

League of Women Voters of Central New Mexico

Guidelines for Conducting a Forum

The League of Women Voters has a history of focusing candidate campaigns on issues and helping voters get clear answers to their questions. A recognized means for this is a forum or candidate meeting that includes questions from the audience. Sponsors should be impartial and welcome the opportunity to give voters real information about the candidates and their positions on issues. This handbook has been prepared with these thoughts in mind.

Why hold a Candidate Forum?

Candidate forums provide the public with an opportunity to see, hear, and question candidates. In return, the meetings allow candidates to give the voters the reasons they want the office they are seeking and to tell their qualifications. Although candidate forums are not the appropriate place for the audience to recommend action to the candidates, they should allow voters to express their concerns about issues of importance to them and to solicit suggestions from the candidates for solutions to problems.

Nonpartisan candidate forums present the candidates to the voters without suggesting that any candidate be supported or opposed. Nonpartisan meetings encourage the voters to make their own decisions about candidates.

The League of Women Voters of Central New Mexico (LWVCNM) has been organizing and moderating candidate forums for many years. This guide is just a collection of tried and true suggestions. Adapt what works best for your situation.

Check List & Tips for Sponsors

Those sponsoring a forum between or among candidates need to make some arrangements in advance. These arrangements will depend on the size of the expected audience and the number of candidates. The following suggestions are made to help sponsors organize their event.

Essentials

1. **Plan well in advance of the event.** Check whether other organizations in your area are also sponsoring forums involving the same candidates. (Is it possible to join forces?)
2. **Determine the approximate size of the audience.** Any candidate should be assured that there will be at least 15 people in the audience.

3. **Set the date, time and location.** One and one-half hours to two hours is sufficient, but this will depend upon the number of candidates and the number of issues.
4. **Determine speaking time** to be allocated for each candidate.
5. **Invite all candidates by phone**, and then follow up with a detailed letter (see page 12).
6. **Provide the name of each candidate, the office for which each is running and a copy of the candidate letter to the moderator.**
7. **Determine how to notify your audience** -- flyers? Radio/TV ads? Newsletters? E-mail lists? Other?
8. **Other publicity** — news releases? Appearances on radio and TV?
9. **Arrange for moderator and timekeepers** (The LWVCNM may be available.)

Types of Forums

Basic Forum Format: Short individual “opening statements” of one to two minutes, followed by questions from the audience read by the moderator, usually followed by one to two minutes for a closing speech by each candidate. The League usually conducts forums using this format.

Discussion Format: A panel or moderator asks questions of candidates. Candidates may be given time to make a statement. Usually panels decide the questions to ask.

Debate Format: Works well when there are fewer candidates but requires an experienced moderator. Each candidate must have an equal amount of time for an opening and closing statement. Between the statements, the candidates can refute each other’s opening statement or answer questions from the floor, from a panel, or from the moderator.

Critical Sponsor Arrangements

- Make sure all candidates are invited.
- Confirm the date, time and location.
- Ask about physical arrangements.
- How large is the room?
- Will there be microphones for the moderator and the candidates? Will floor microphones for the audience be needed?
- How will the tables be arranged for the candidates, timekeepers and moderator? (Timekeepers, at a separate table, must be in a position to be clearly seen by the candidates and moderator.)
- Make name cards for the candidates. They should be printed clearly on both sides and large enough for the moderator and timekeepers to read.
- Will there be media coverage?
- Has a letter been sent to each candidate describing the format and time limit and all relevant details?

- Provide sufficient volunteers to usher.
- Will you use a panel of questioners without questions from the audience?
- Will the audience be allowed to ask questions from the floor? If so, place a time limit on questions.
- Or will questions be limited to index cards from the audience?
- Establish the procedure for distribution and collection of index cards if you use them (use volunteers).
- Will there be prepared questions? If so, prepare them in advance for the moderator.
- How long will the forum last?
- How long will each candidate have for answering?
- Will rebuttal be permitted? If so, how long? Will an opening and closing statement from each candidate be expected? If so, how long?
- Exchange telephones number between the sponsor and moderator.

Physical Arrangement

1. **Need tables for candidates, moderator and timekeepers** (the timekeepers need a table that is visible to both the candidates and moderator).
2. **Microphones** for candidates? For moderator? How many will be needed?
3. **Determine the stage arrangement.**
4. **Where are the lights?**
5. **Need water** for candidates and moderator.
6. **Provide table signs**, which are printed on both sides with the candidates' names and large enough for audience and moderator to read.
7. **Provide stop watch, chairs and time cards** - 30 seconds, 15 seconds and STOP for timekeepers (If LWVCNM is timekeeping we will bring our own equipment.)
8. **Provide index cards and pencils** for questions from the audience.
9. **Provide volunteers to hand out the cards** and collect them (need method of identifying these volunteers).
10. **Who will set up the room? Sound system?**
11. **Where are the restrooms?**

What does the Sponsor do when arriving at the Forum?

- Arrive at least one hour early.
- Set up and check the seating arrangements and the microphones.
- Make sure drinking water and cups are available for the moderator and candidates
- Make certain that table signs are in place.

Beginning the Forum

Identify the person who is responsible for:

- Starting the forum as close to the appointed time as possible.
- Announcing that the forum is about to commence and that everyone should be seated.
- Welcoming those attending.
- Introducing those attending.
- Introducing the moderator.

Check List & Tips for Moderator

The moderator will "set the tone" for the forum and must remember at all times to be impartial. The moderator should be able to speak clearly; be reasonably familiar with the issues to be covered; be able to organize the ideas expressed on the index cards; keep the audience in line; keep the candidates within their limits.

Initial Responsibilities of the Moderator

- Make sure you have the name of all candidates, the office for which they are running and a copy of the letter that candidates were sent.
- Get a written copy of the procedures for the forum and the procedure for dealing with index cards with questions from the audience.
- Ask the sponsor to provide you with some questions in the event the audience does not have many.
- Ask about hot issues that may be asked in audience questions.
- What are the time limits? How long will each candidate have for answering? Will rebuttal be expected? If so, how long? Ask if an opening and closing statement from each candidate will be permitted? If so, how long?
- Who is responsible for drawing the order of the candidates? (Drawing of lots is a suggested method for identifying the order.)
- Get contact number for liaison with sponsor.

What does the Moderator do when arriving at the Forum?

- Introduce yourself to the sponsor.
- Introduce yourself to the candidates.
- Check the pronunciation of any unusual names and the preferred title, Mr., Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., etc.
- Explain the timing and questioning procedure to candidates.
- Ask the timekeepers to demonstrate the timing procedures.
- Unless it is already arranged, have each candidate draw a number for the order of answering questions.
- Make sure drinking water and cups are available for you (moderator) and the candidates.

Arranging the Index Cards

Separate questions into three categories:

1. Those that are clear, concise, relevant, and can be read directly from the card,
2. Those that are illegible, not relevant and designed only to embarrass (should not be used),
3. Those that are relevant but require rewording by you in order to be asked.

LWVCNM often has another person who screens and sorts questions for the moderator during the forum.

Conducting the Forum

1. Introduce yourself and the timekeeper to the audience and announce the ground rules of the forum.
2. Introduce each candidate for his/her opening statement.
3. While the candidates are giving their opening statement, complete arranging the index cards with questions.
4. Read the first question for the first candidate.
5. Rotate the asking of questions. Ask the second question first to the person who responded second on the previous question, etc.
6. Ask the questions on major issues grouped by subject. Minor questions can be interspersed but be flexible. Shorten the candidate response time for minor questions if necessary. If time permits, work on the rewrites during the time the candidates are answering other questions.
7. If a candidate requests that a question be repeated, repeat it, but the time for answering continues to run unless the question is unusually long or there are a large number of candidates.
8. If rebuttal is permitted, ask for rebuttal in the same order as the questioning; wait until all candidates have answered before beginning rebuttal; do not repeat the question for the rebuttal.
9. If the timekeeper has signaled that time for a speaker has expired, wait a brief moment for the candidate to complete the sentence and then announce in a strong voice, "**Your time has expired**".
10. If either you or the candidates appear to be getting tired before the scheduled break, take a brief break (one idea is to ask if there are any more index cards with questions).
11. If the audience is too noisy, persists in clapping, etc., give a pleasant but stern warning to them.
12. If the audience becomes unruly or raucous, terminate the forum.
13. The moderator has the right to ask a "follow-up" question if it appears necessary. Write the question so that you will ask it the same way to all candidates.

14. End as close as possible to the prearranged time even if questions remain unanswered.
15. Tell the audience if there are unanswered questions.
16. Close by thanking the candidates, sponsor, timekeepers and the audience.

Don'ts

- Show bias or partisanship.
- Express any reaction to any comments given by any candidate.
- Become ruffled if the audience or a candidate misbehaves.
- Lose your composure if you misspeak or call on a candidate in the wrong order.
- Get into an argument with a candidate.
- Try to "pin a candidate down" if he/she is unresponsive to a question.
- Accept the position of moderator if you are a known supporter of one of the candidates.
- Back out of serving as moderator after you have agreed to do so unless an emergency requires it.
- Pay so much attention to the candidates' responses that you lose track of your role as moderator.

Help for Timekeepers

1. Check with the moderator to find out how much time will be allowed for: opening remarks, responses, answers to questions, rebuttal and closing remarks.
2. Someone should brief the candidates on timing procedures.
3. Place the table so that your sign can be seen clearly by all candidates and the moderator.
4. Check equipment: stop watch, bell, 30 and 15-second signs, and stop sign.
5. Wind stopwatch.
6. Start watch as soon as speaker begins talking.
7. When each speaker finishes speaking, the timekeeper stops the watch and then turns it back to the zero position in order to prepare for the next speaker.
8. Ring the bell if candidate continues to speak after time has expired.

Sample Letter

Dear Candidate,

Thank you for accepting the invitation to participate in our candidates' forum on _____ (date) at _____ (location) from _____ pm to _____ pm.

The following guidelines will govern the forum. The moderator will introduce those involved in the forum, explain the ground rules and introduce the candidates. After this each candidate will have (2 minutes) for opening remarks. Written questions from the audience for the candidates will be given to the moderator. Each candidate will have equal time for an answer (2 minutes, 1 minute). Rebuttals will (will not) be allowed. Each candidate will (will not) be given the opportunity to present a (2 minute) closing statement.

There will (will not) be a table provided for candidate literature.

We look forward to meeting you and hearing your views on the issues.

Sincerely,

This letter should also contain name, address, forum sponsor information and telephone number. Include cell contact in case emergencies arise.