

Making a Difference!

2016 Election Forums by the Numbers

22 events
20 days
18 venues
10 cities

1765 attendees
in person

48 candidates
(30 primary; 18
general election)

36 partners
(local Leagues,
co-sponsoring
organizations &
media)

5 Sound Transit
(ST3) forums

1000's of viewers
TVW, local access channels and
online



LWVWA
Education Fund

Carrying out the LWV mission of encouraging the informed and active participation of citizens in government is the reason we sponsor candidate debates.

Overall Strategy

Even in the simplest debate, the sponsoring organization needs to designate someone to set policy and someone to carry it out.

Funding

Money needs to be set aside for cover costs such as advertising, venue and other expenses. Selection of partners, sponsors, and co-sponsors can be done based on their ability to provide a venue at no or reduced cost.

Chain of Command

The Forum Manager reported to the Board regularly and apprised the Board President of issues on an as needed basis. A group that was interested in the working on the forums was used as a sounding board. Individuals with specific expertise were called on as required. At least two LWV representatives attended all forum related meetings with co-sponsors and potential co-sponsors.

Local Involvement

Each forum had local league involvement. The local league helped identify venues, moderators, sponsors and partners, local advertising, volunteers and anything else that was needed locally at the specific locations.

TV and Internet coverage

Getting your TV broadcast commitment early is paramount. We learned late in the forum cycle that the debates could be live-streamed via Facebook (TVW did not realize it either) and so we took advantage of that for the last few forums. A relationship was developed with the TV programming producer so that TVW crews were sent to almost all of our events. Where they were not able to cover the event due to a conflict, contact was made with local area public access, municipal TV broadcasters and they were able to provide a broadcast crew and the film was then shared with TVW for state-wide airing.

Publicity

Press releases and fliers were used for the 2016 forums with various levels of success. The most effective were fliers provided to sponsors, co-sponsors and partners and publicized through their networks. The LWVWA website also posted the events and linked the reader to the videos after the fact.

Venue considerations

Consider the expected size of the audience, parking availability, and ease of locating the venue. Cost is a consideration. Selection of a partner or sponsor who can give access for a free or reduced rate worked well for the 2016 venues. Other considerations were lighting and the acoustics. Also, if the event is being televised, the camera folks may have preferences if they have used the venue previously.

Partners/Sponsors/Co-Sponsors

Selecting partners, sponsors and co-sponsors is important for turnout, venue cost and advertising, but can send the wrong message to the public if they are not vetted appropriately.

Considerations in selecting are

- Have they endorsed, made contributions to or made negative comments regarding candidates?
- Do you have balance in the sponsorship (both sides of the aisle politically)?
- Can they provide a venue at low or no cost, advertising or other needed support and are they willing to make a cash donation to the Education Fund?

Financial or in-kind contributions for sponsorship should be addressed early and a policy set with definitions for what constitutes partner, sponsor, and co-sponsor.

Questions Gathered for the Various Offices

Questions were requested from as broad a spectrum of organizations as possible. Requesting the questions gave an opportunity to re-contact the organization to remind them of the event, provide them with fliers they could send out and invite them to inform their members about the event. Questions gathered for various state-wide offices can be found in <https://lwwa.org/Candidate-Forum-Support/>

Forum Scripts

A script was used for all the forums. At each forum the LWVWA representative (usually the President) made opening comments, and a couple of minutes was given to sponsors, co-sponsors, and partners as negotiated ahead.

Questions from the Audience

Audience questions were gathered real time at each event. Blank 3x5 cards were handed out to audience members and picked up by runners. The questions were screened by LWV representatives to consolidate and clean up before the questions were conveyed to the moderator on stage. No questions were allowed directly from the audience.

Usually the scripted questions were asked first then the moderator used the last 15 minutes or so to ask audience questions.

Better Forum Attendance

Think co-sponsorship if you want better attendance at your forums. This means thinking about what kinds of organizations have an interest in the office. Reach out widely. Provide them with promotional materials frequently.

If the organization has taken sides or endorsed one of the candidates, you can still ask them for questions to be considered for the forum. You can also ask them if they will promote the event. You can provide them with posters or even just the information about what, when and where that they can forward out through their networks. You just can't ask them to sponsor.

Lessons learned

Keep metrics during the entire cycle rather than try to generate them at the end.

Disclaimers were only used for the first few forums in 2016. The candidates were asked to sign the disclaimer at the time they checked in for the forum saying that they would abide by the ground rules. We stopped using them and took the position that if they accepted the invitation, they accepted the ground rules.

Generally, it is advisable to NOT let candidates give opening comments. Rather have the moderator start the forum by introducing each candidate and asking each in turn what qualifies them for the office. This should be done with a 1 or 2 minute limit to keep the event on track.

We started by asking the candidates to arrive an hour early. This was way too much time. Backed off to 30 mins.

The candidates and audience may benefit from a mic check before the event.

When greeters are used make sure they are not impeding entrance to the venue.

When calling to ask for sponsorship in some form or calling to ask for questions to be used during the forums, be sure to get the contacts email so you can follow up with a flier about the event that you can ask them to publicize through their networks.

Make sure you have multiple folks taking pictures of the crowd, volunteers, moderator, other speakers and the candidates. This was overlooked numerous times or only one person took pictures and they were unusable for one reason or another.

If you decide to let absent candidates have a statement read keep it to about 250 words.

Picking a moderator that is well known or associated with a news organization can increase attendance or provide needed publicity. However, these folks may go off script. We had a TV moderator in the Tri-Cities abandon our questions and go right to audience generated questions.

You can ask for donations from sponsors, but you need to have an approach in mind so it can be consistently applied.

Sponsors also are great sources of questions.

Make sure your have a balance of sponsors from each political side.

Make sure your sponsors have not endorsed a candidate before the forum occurs.

It gets boring asking the same question repeatedly.....no real solution.

Allowed the candidates one or two competitor challenges per debate. We used challenge paddles.

Materials presented here are documented with examples at <https://lwwa.org/Candidate-Forum-Support/>

Down Ticket Forums held in 2016

- Lieutenant Governor (Seattle)
- Secretary of State (Seattle, Tri-Cities)
- Treasurer (Seattle)
- Auditor (Seattle)
- Attorney General (Tri-Cities)
- Superintendent of Public Instruction (Bellingham, Bremerton, Everett, Tacoma-twice, Tri-Cities)
- Commissioner of Public Lands (Bellingham, Olympia)
- Supreme Court Justices (Spokane, Olympia)

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