



League of Women Voters of Washington

Empowering all Washingtonians to engage in a more responsible & responsive democracy

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE FORUMS

The League of Women Voters Guidelines for Nonpartisan Candidate Meetings

Candidate meetings provide a public service. The audience has an opportunity to see, hear, and question candidates. The meetings allow candidates to give reasons for wanting the office they seek and to tell of their qualifications.

Candidate meetings are not a forum for the audience to recommend action to the candidates. They should however, 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 meetings present the candidates without suggesting that any candidate be supported or opposed. Nonpartisan meetings encourage the voters to make their own decisions about candidates.

Many of the techniques described here are also applicable to other public forums and informational meetings.

BE FLEXIBLE! Don't be intimidated by all the information included in this guide. This is just a collection of tried and true suggestions. You don't have to use them all; adapt what works best for your situation.

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Organizing The Meeting

Start early! Planning should begin at least two months before the election. For complete information about election dates and filing deadlines, call the county auditor's office. The filing deadline for candidates is the fourth Monday in July and continues through the following Friday. Closure on filings, because of drops and party additions (allowing for opponents to already announced candidates), occurs the following week. It is at this closure that completed lists are available.

Candidates for local and county offices file with the county auditor/election office and candidates for state and national office file with the Secretary of State. When the final deadline for filing to run for election has passed, you may request an unofficial list of candidates and their addresses from the appropriate election office. Before that time information may be available from party offices.

To get a list of local candidates:

[County Auditor](#)



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To find information on state and national candidates:

[Secretary of State](#)

All sponsors should be involved in every phase of planning the meeting. Sponsors for a candidates forum should not include groups that officially rate or endorse candidates.

There are some decisions that need to be made very early. Stars mark the following items where they appear in more detail later in this guide.

- Are substitutes or written statements acceptable in place of candidates unable to attend?
- Will declared write-in candidates be included?
- Should candidates be told in advance what opening question will be asked?
- Will questions from the audience be directed to one candidate to save time, or to all candidates to allow the audience to compare answers?
- Will video or audio recording be allowed?
- Can candidates distribute campaign literature?
- Plan what to do if candidates do not arrive on time.

Who is invited?

The first decision to make in holding a candidate meeting is whom to invite. All candidates for a particular office must be included but it is not necessary to include every office. Candidate meetings held before primary elections may include only the candidates of one party since all the participants are vying for the same goal - to be their party's nominee.

The first contact with candidates will be an invitation to participate. It will probably be by telephone. A letter of confirmation should follow when all details are in place. The letter should include the following:

- Date, time and place of proposed meeting.
- Offices to be included.
- Sponsor(s) of meeting.
- A statement that the meeting will be nonpartisan. Emphasize this repeatedly!
- Purpose of the meeting - to provide a public service.
- A request for biographical information.
- Format for the meeting, including details of question period.
- Policy regarding candidate substitutes and possible write-in candidates.



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- Policy about campaign literature, signs, audio-visual materials.
- Plans for media coverage.
- Date by which a reply is expected.

Make sure a confirmed response is received, in writing or in person, not just a message on an answering machine. Candidates have caused problems for meeting sponsors when they claimed they were not invited to the meeting. Send a certified letter if necessary to get verification of candidate's receipt of an invitation. It is suggested that the candidate should again be contacted and reminded about the event a week beforehand. If an invited candidate cannot be present, some sponsors allow a representative of the candidate's campaign to attend. That representative may be allowed to distribute literature and read a prepared statement, but may not be allowed to answer questions.

A policy must be set to say whether a candidate may send a substitute or may submit a written Hi statement if unable to attend. It does not serve the public to have a candidate debate an empty chair. Every effort should be made to accommodate the schedule of the candidates to insure their participation. If, at the last minute, a candidate is not available, a policy already set to allow a substitute or to cancel the meeting will give guidance in proceeding.

A decision must also be made as to write-in candidates. Set standards to determine if a write-in candidate is running a bona-fide campaign, or set the policy to exclude all write-in candidates. Some criteria to use in determining if a write-in campaign is serious:

- Is the candidate eligible for the office?
- Does the candidate have a campaign manager?
- Is there a campaign treasurer?
- Is the candidate distributing literature?

When will it be?

An early decision will be the date of the event. Much will depend upon the community event calendar, the schedules of the candidates, the availability of a meeting place, and the time that the media may be willing to attend. Try for the ideal - early enough to generate interest - yet late enough so that people?

Are ready to consider the candidates. It should not be a holiday of any kind. It should not coincide with meetings of political parties, of other organizations that draw large numbers of people, or an important sport event such as the World Series. It should not be so late that many people have already voted by absentee ballot. Schedule the meeting sufficiently in advance of the election to allow for press coverage after the meeting. This coverage can be one of the most valuable assets of the meeting because it provides some information for those who did not attend.



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Where will it be?

Reserve the meeting place as soon as possible. Consider the size, convenience, facilities, rental fee. Parking, access to equipment for refreshments, and whether it is handicapped accessible. Be sure to check the lighting and sound system. Arrange for admission before the scheduled time of the event to check the sound equipment, lights, and platform setup.

What will be happening?

The number of candidates will often decide the format for the meeting. The optimum time for a candidate meeting is about one and one-half hours.

The basic form is short individual speeches of two to five minutes followed by questions from the audience, usually with one to two minutes for a closing speech by each candidate.

A discussion format has a panel or moderator asking questions of candidates. Candidates may be given time to make a statement, and questions may come from the floor.

Panels asking questions should include those with some background pertinent to the office. For example, a panel questioning school board candidates might include a teacher, a parent, a student or recent graduate. The panels decide the questions to ask and the order in which the questions are answered by the candidates. Plans must be set as to time limits and candidates must know the limits.

A debate is particularly good when there are fewer candidates. Each candidate must have an equal amount of time for an opening and closing statement. Between the statements, the candidates can refute each others' opening statement or answer questions from the floor, from a panel, or from the moderator.

A timed script is necessary to insure that all candidates have the same opportunity to express themselves. Remember, the formal part of the meeting should last no more than an hour and a half. Once the number of candidates and the format have been decided, the time can be divided to allow each candidate a limited amount of time to make a statement or answer a question. Each candidate must know the procedure and agree to it.

More informal candidate meetings can be held when the audience is divided to meet with candidates. For example, the audience may sit at tables and the candidates rotate, spending a limited amount of time talking with each group.

Questions for the candidates

Good questions at the start of the meeting can help to focus on issues of importance to the audience. The potential audience can be polled for questions before the candidate meeting. Questions can be requested in meeting notices and in community newspapers. A committee can prepare the questions to avoid duplications and insure suitability. These questions could be placed in envelopes, identified only by number. At the candidate meeting the candidates can draw a number that determines their order of speaking and the question they will initially be asked.



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Candidates will want to know the questions before the meeting. The organizers must decide whether to test the ability of the candidates to think on their feet or allow them time to develop a topic in depth. The latter method risks their use of a speech writer and of research done by others.

Some decisions need to be made about the audience question period. The question period after statements by the candidates can be the most interesting part of the meeting. When there are many candidates, consider cutting the time for opening and closing statements or eliminate statements altogether to preserve time for questions.

The moderator could have a few prepared questions to start so that time will not be lost as the questions are submitted by the audience.

To preserve time for the candidates to speak and to avoid repetition, written questions are preferred. A panel or screening committee, can review the questions as they are collected from the audience to prevent repetition and to insure that the questions are appropriate to the office.

Will each candidate have an opportunity to answer each question from the audience or can questions be directed to a single candidate?

Good topics for candidates for state office are education; environment; taxes; highways and public transportation; health and welfare; and problems of the elderly, disadvantaged, and youth. Many of these same topics could be discussed by candidates for city or county offices. Candidates for school boards have a more limited field. In addition to the perennial question of money, their opinions on state and/or federal aid, personnel policies, curriculum, collective bargaining, fitness and recreation programs, libraries, building programs, outcome based education, and busing are relevant.

Judicial candidates are seldom included in a candidate meeting because the conduct of their campaigns is governed by a code of judicial conduct, which greatly restricts what they can talk about. The most important point to remember in developing questions for judicial candidates is that they should not be asked to express an opinion about issues that they may later be asked to rule upon as judge. It is proper, though, to ask what experience qualifies them to serve; if they are endorsed by the local Bar; if any of their legal papers have been published; what community involvement they've had; how judges should be selected.

Other issues of concern

Seating arrangements for the candidates must be decided before the event. The candidates can be seated alphabetically, by political party, by legislative district, or any manner mutually acceptable.

Some candidates are concerned that their statements will be recorded and later quoted out of context. During the planning a policy should be decided about video and audio recording of the candidate meeting and all candidates should agree to the policy. If no individual recording is permitted, the moderator must tell the audience; and ushers or someone from the planning committee must enforce the decision. Candidates will probably not object to the media recording their statements but this should be discussed with them and made part of the final policy.



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A decision about campaign literature must also be made and shared with the candidates. If distribution is allowed, arrangements should be made to do so in a manner that does not suggest the meeting sponsors support any particular candidates (for example, handing out literature at the door). A table can be made available in the back of the room for each candidate to leave their literature. Each candidate should have a table or a designated space. One candidate may otherwise take all the available area.

Consider the possibility that the candidates may not all arrive on time for the meeting. How will the event proceed? How long will the meeting be delayed? Discussion of this possibility will provide guidance for the candidates and the meeting organizers. Again, all decisions are shared with the candidates during the planning process.

If refreshments are planned, decide what will be served and who will be responsible. Decaffeinated coffee is recommended for evening meetings. Allow at least one hour to prepare.

Publicizing The Meeting

Conducting a candidate meeting with another service organization is a good way to generate more audience. Besides the League of Women Voters, other organizations might include local service organizations, American Association of University Women (AAUW), Chambers of Commerce, American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), or college or university student groups, etc. An early start in planning how to share responsibilities helps guarantee success. Cooperating groups should be in on all decision making and agree to respect the nonpartisan nature of the candidate meeting.

Local newspapers are most interested in local elections. Many are weekly papers and notices must reach them three weeks before the event to be published in time. A press release, stating the candidates invited, date, time, place, and format, should be sent as early as possible.

Nonprofit organizations that work to improve the community through various kinds of service are eligible to place a Public Service Announcement (PSA) with radio and television stations. Contact the station's public service director or program manager for advice as to length and form. Be sure to contact the local cable television company to learn if the event can be carried on the local cable public access channel.

Building interest for the event depends upon getting the word out. Have the meeting listed on school and community calendars and bulletin boards. Ask banks and shopping centers with lighted signs to post the meeting. Notify any colleges or universities in the area and invite the students and faculty, particularly those in the political science department. Invite teachers from the local high school and ask them to extend the invitation to their government classes. Flyers distributed to members of the sponsoring organizations can include a "ticket" to be clipped and used as a reminder to attend the event.

With permission from the art department of schools, try a poster contest. This will generate posters, possibly press coverage, and get word to students and their parents.



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Have Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts for ushers. Invite the school glee club, orchestra, or band to open and/or close the candidate meeting. (This may have a side effect of bringing their parents out to hear the candidates.)

Immediately before the meeting, call any media you think are interested and remind the editors or reporters of the event.

Information submitted by the candidates to the meeting organizers about the candidates experience or qualifications can be made available to both the audience and the media. Combined with the candidate meeting agenda, the candidate biographical information makes an appropriate program for the event.

Conducting The Meeting

Organizers should arrive early to post any signs necessary to direct audience to meeting place. Bring tape, poster cards or paper, marking pens.

To avoid last minute confusion, you should consider:

PROGRAM

An agenda for the meeting tells the audience what to expect. It should include a written description of the office the candidate seeks including term, salary, duties, and requirements.

Biographical information submitted by the candidates may also be included.

HOSTS

Candidates should be met on arrival. Have large name tags for candidates listing name, party, and the office for which they are running. Introduce the candidates to the officers of the organization(s) sponsoring the event and to the moderator.

USHERS

Ushers help with seating, distribute programs, pencils and cards for questions, and collect question cards from the audience to give to the screening committee.

SOUND/LIGHT TECHNICIAN

The microphones must be in good working order and should be checked before the meeting. If there are several candidates, the microphones should be placed among the candidates so as to avoid long delays. Try to have candidates remain seated and not have to walk to the podium each time to answer questions. Lights need to be focused on the candidates and moderator but also sufficient for audience participation.

TIMEKEEPER

A dependable timekeeper equipped with a stop watch, flash cards, and a bell or signal light is a key person at a candidate meeting. Accurate time keeping is necessary to be fair to all candidates. Before



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the meeting starts, the moderator and timekeeper should agree on how they will handle any interruptions. The timekeeper should be readily visible to the moderator and the candidates but not block the audience view or be unduly distracting. Sometimes the speaker is given a warning signal a few seconds before running out of time so as to end on time. Example: green, yellow, and red cards used like traffic signals.

QUESTION SCREENING COMMITTEE

The panel should include representatives of all sponsoring organizations. Persons familiar with the duties and scope of the office(s) that the candidates seek can best judge the relevance of the questions. A backstage facility for the screening committee is desirable. (See screening committee worksheet for additional suggestions.)

PLATFORM

Pencils, paper, gavel, water, cups and chairs should all be arranged on the platform. If a table is used, it is more attractive if the front is covered to the floor. Each candidate should be identified by a large print place card.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

A person designated as liaison for radio/TV/press should welcome the reporters, find them good seats (if they are expected, some seats should be reserved), and remind the reporters that the organizers are not supporting any one candidate and that all running have been invited.

A list should be on hand to check off as candidates arrive. The letters candidates return to the meeting organizers should also be on hand to indicate that all have been invited.

Valuable exhibits at candidate meetings are precinct maps with location of polling places and sample ballots. Sample ballots are available from Division of Records and Elections about three weeks before the election. Precinct descriptions and lists of polling places are also available from the same office.

REFRESHMENTS

These can be served at any time; however, waiting until the end of the meeting allows the audience an opportunity to mix informally and talk with the candidates.

OPENING THE MEETING

The president of (one of) the sponsoring organization(s) opens the meeting by welcoming the audience, stating that the meeting is nonpartisan and introducing the moderator. If the order of speakers has not yet been determined, the president and moderator make the decision. It can be alphabetically, by toss of a coin, drawing a number out of a hat, choosing from different length straws, etc.

The Moderator

A well-qualified moderator is essential for a successful candidate meeting. Look for a poised and assertive individual who can maintain control over the meeting's progress without stifling audience and



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candidate participation. The person must be impartial. The role of the moderator is essential; an alternate should be designated in advance to be ready in event of illness.

At least a week before the meeting the moderator should have in writings the location of the meeting and directions, a script, the names of meeting organizers, ground rules, offices and candidates to be included, and any prepared questions. The moderator also needs to have a description of the offices that the candidates seek including term, salary, duties, and qualification. A short biography of each candidate may be needed for introductions.

If a ballot issue is likely to be discussed at the meeting, the moderator should have a written explanation of the issue.

Before the meeting the moderator and meeting organizers should check the signed acceptances submitted by candidates and resolve any last minute problems that may arise regarding a candidate's participation. The moderator will also want to check his or her own microphone and seating arrangement so as to have good eye contact with the candidates, the timekeeper, and the audience.

When introduced, the moderator outlines the format and ground nobles for the meeting emphasizing that the purpose of the meeting is to hear each candidate's views. The moderator then introduces the candidates for the first office on the program, gives a few details about the office. Term, salary, and qualifications (if not included in the program), and notes if the incumbent is present All candidates for a given office should be introduced before individual speeches begin.

Once a candidate has begun to speak, the moderator should not interrupt unless the remarks constitute a personal attack on an opponent or the timekeeper gives a cut-off signal.

After all candidates, or all candidates for a particular office, have spoken, the moderator opens the meeting to questions Mom the audience and explains the procedure. If questions are addressed to the candidates in general, the order of responders rotates and the moderator should write down the rotation to insure accuracy and fairness. The timekeeper should signal the candidates as appropriate.

At the appointed time, the moderator closes the meeting, thanks all for attending and reminds the audience of the hours when polls are open. (See moderator's worksheet or additional suggestions.)

Thank you notes should be sent to all candidates who attend.

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