

HOW TO: HOST A CANDIDATE FORUM

Candidate debates are a key component of a political campaign because they:

- ◆ Provide voters with an opportunity to hear the candidates discuss important issues
- ◆ Illustrate the differences between candidates
- ◆ Provide candidates with information on what is important to their constituents
- ◆ Provide an important public service

Benefits of Debates

- ◆ Helps voters make electoral decisions - judge the candidates' character, communication skills, sense of humor, ability to think on their feet and knowledge of issues
- ◆ Post-debate surveys show that debates do influence voters' choices, especially undecided voters
- ◆ Get candidates on the record so they can be held accountable for their stated positions on issues
- ◆ Candidates see debates as an opportunity to get their message out to the voters

A Sample Debate Timetable

This is a sample schedule, assuming a debate for a major office and attracting media to the debate:

(Allotted planning time is 4 months. There is a September primary and a November general Election, but the debate is for the general election only).

4 months ahead of debate: (June)

Set the date of debate (example: **Week of September 30th**)

Create a committee to work on the debate – set up meeting schedule

Funding (ask a local agency to sponsor event – provide paper, mailing)

Preliminary decisions: format, site, audience

3 months ahead of debate: (July)

Select site of the debate

First informal contact with potential candidates - invite to forum if they win.

Discussions with potential media begins (identify who would cover story and call to speak with them event)

Begin design of forum materials

2 months ahead of debate: (August)

Format selection (see below)

Volunteers recruited (see table below)

1 month ahead of debate: (Sept.)

After September 10, 2008 (primary), call candidates running in general elections to congratulate and invite them to forum

Week of Sept. 16th materials printed, distributed, and sent

Media advisory sent on debate date

Volunteers assigned

Site arrangements reconfirmed

Candidates notified about format, schedule and arrangements at site

Ask debate committee and local agencies/providers for projected turnout of event.

1 week ahead of debate:

Call coalition participants and local agencies/providers and ask them to call their members regarding forum attendance.

All details reconfirmed

Send press release to local media and follow up with a reminder call one day ahead.

2 weeks after the debate:

Thank you letters and mementos sent to all participants and volunteers

Tasks for volunteers include:

Before the debate:

- Help with news releases and conferences
- Produce materials
- Design and distribute flyers and posters

During the debate:

- greet people
- escort candidates

After the debate:

- monitor and clip news coverage
- help evaluate the debate.

Things to Consider:

Questions

Do you want to solicit questions from the audience orally or in writing? If answers are submitted in writing at the beginning of the forum, identify people who will pick them up, sort the questions by topic, and pass to the moderator. Or do you want to prepare the questions ahead of time yourself?

Speakers

Do you want someone from the coalition and/or a local agency to open and close the forum? The opening speaker introduces him/her, welcomes the candidates, thanks the committee or group who worked on the forum and introduces the moderator. The closing speaker thanks everyone for participating and adds any other announcements.

Time

How much time do you and the candidates have? You may want to consider have a moderator who asks the questions to the candidates, and alternate which candidate starts for each question. Do you want candidates to limit the length of their answer? If so, you may also consider a timer who keeps track of time and announces to the candidate with a card how much time they have left to answer the question (i.e. for a 2 minute answer, present a “one-minute” and “stop” card.