

HOW TO PLAN FOR A DEBATE / CANDIDATE FORUM

OVER

Overview: While the core part of voter service is to empower the public with a voice in their government by registering them to vote and educating them about the issues in the campaigns, the main purpose of a debate or candidates meeting is: 1) to provide an opportunity for voters to hear candidates discuss those issues face to face; and, 2) to provide an opportunity for the public to engage their candidates.^(a)

The Federal Communications Commission (FEC) defines these terms:

Debate – an event that includes at least two candidates; and, is staged in a way that does not promote or advance one candidate over another; and allows the candidates to appear concurrently in face-to-face confrontations, with opportunities to respond to each other.

Non-Debate Candidate Appearances (candidate forums, speeches, etc.) – defined as place, meeting or medium where ideas and views on a particular issue are exchanged.

For our purposes, we will use the term “debate” interchangeably with “candidate forum,” as the mechanics of organizing one are almost identical.

Tools (indispensable) to use for planning are the publications:

- › **Face-to-Face, the LWV's Guide to Candidate Debates**, 1996 ©, revised 2007 (LWVUS),
- › **Road to the Voting Booth, Pt. II (A Handbook for Candidate Meetings)**, 1994 ©, rev. 2002, (LWVNY).
- › **First Vote** – (back cover), to learn which offices are elected when; and
- › **Political Calendar** – published by NYS Board of Elections, see www.elections.ny.gov

NOTE: The LWV/Utica-Rome Board of Directors has the ultimate say on whether or not to hold a debate, as well as all the other major logistical decisions which follow after a debate has been scheduled.

STEP I - Call a meeting of the Voter Service Committee by late June, early July each year -- agenda to include:

- Set up a timeline; review deadlines when filing petitions are due as per *NYS Political Calendar* (Generally by late July, petitions are delivered to the BOE and the names of candidates will be available soon after. Judicial candidates not known until sometime in September after their district conventions. Keep in close contact with the Oneida County Board of Elections as to offices/candidates up for election.
- Decide on which offices/candidates to focus for a debate. [Refer to “Road to the...Pt. II” for guidance.]
- Consider holding a debate before a primary election as well as for the general election.
- Set up a budget: publicity/advertising, site rental, phone/fax costs, printing, sound system.
- Brainstorm on who to recruit as co-sponsors.
- Draw up a “sponsor agreement,” which states the tasks the sponsor will handle as part of the event. Get commitments “up front” from the sponsors.
- Create necessary committees and assign responsibilities.
- Research availability of meeting dates, sites, (central location, accessible), TV, cable, radio, etc.
- Discuss formats and ground rules, and who will serve as moderator.

STEP II - Send out letter of invitation to candidates to determine their interest and availability for a debate. Indicate a deadline by when their decision is due. [Need FAXED response with their signature.]

- Make follow-up phone calls if response not received at deadline.
- Once some candidates have responded, start generating publicity. This will put pressure on the candidates who have not as yet responded to do so.

NOTE: Be sure to find out early on who the campaign managers for these candidates are. They are the key people with whom you will keep in contact throughout the debate planning. Always check and double check to see if indeed they received your communications.

STEP III - Once response received from candidates via their signed, faxed letter, mail them a letter of acknowledgement to include the “Forum Format & Policy,” which is basically the “ground rules” for the debate. [Generally it's the same each year – depending on the “style” of debate we hold.] Include a “Biographical Data Form” for the candidate to fill in the basics on his/her background.

- **Panelists:** “Who?” and “How Many?” are the operating questions. The number of candidates participating as well as the time frame of the debate govern the number of panelists required.

- **Moderator:** A League member experienced in moderating is our usual choice. But perhaps a media personality would fill the role. Whatever the choice, now is the time to secure a moderator. If working with a TV station co-sponsor (say, WUTR-TV, for example), you will need to meet with TV staff and the panelists to go over timing, etc., and who (among the panelists) will be asking which type of questions. Timing is everything. The moderator plays an important role here, also.
Media: Be sure to make clear to media outlets that may be video taping the debate that any replay of the debate must be done in its entirety. [See sample *Broadcast Agreement* drawn up by our League to present to the media for their signature.]
- **Publicity:** The whole Board and individual League members need to “get the word out” about the upcoming debate and invite others to come. In addition to newspaper articles and TV and radio announcements, fliers announcing the debate must be posted throughout the district. The Committee could use a Promotions Coordinator to develop a strategy to attract attendees via scheduling public service announcements (PSAs), and the like. Be sure to announce that “admission is free.”
Early on, ask for League volunteers to serve as: timekeepers, greeters/ushers, and to pass out the forum format & policy, and index cards/pencils as people come through the doors, and as screeners for the written questions submitted by the audience.

STEP IV – Obtain the “Biographical Data Forms” back from the candidates and get them to the Moderator a few days before the debate so it can be used in the introduction of the candidates. By the day before the debate, or early on debate day, arrive at the site in plenty of time to assure the sound system is ready to go and that the seating arrangement is satisfactory. Place out name cards on tables where the candidates, panelists, and moderator will be stationed.

Debate Day: Arrive at least one hour before debate start time. Assure that all is set up as planned and that everyone knows her/his role to make this day/evening a success.

Moderator – conducts the debate and always acknowledges our co-sponsors and the site host. [See both “Face-to-Face” and “Road to the Voting Booth, Part II” for comprehensive information on what the role and responsibilities of the Moderator is.]
At debate’s end, Moderator urges everyone to get out to the polls on Election Day.

STEP V – Designated Voter Service Committee member sends thank you letters to our site host for allowing use of their facility, our co-sponsors, and to those who served as panelists and other volunteers who gave of their time and talent to make the event a success.

Some precautions: Candidates, or their managers, will at times make some unreasonable requests during the planning process. We cannot honor those requests if they would negatively impact the other candidates or even appear to give advantage to one individual over another. We need to be vigilant in this regard.

-Submitted by: Karen McBride

TODAY’S DATE: Jan. 29, 2014

Ref. ^(a) = League of Women Voters of NYS: Guidelines for Participation in Debates and Forums by Candidates for Statewide Office, Rev. and Adopted 7/10/07