

Guidelines for Faith Communities Hosting Candidate Forums



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The purpose of candidate forums or any other kind of political forum hosted by a faith community is to provide a civil and welcoming space in which voters can ask questions and be educated on important issues and where candidates for local office stand. Faith communities should understand that a forum should not be a partisan event where certain candidates or parties are promoted, but rather that members of faith communities and the public are called to be informed citizens.

In the spirit of non-partisanship, we offer the following guidelines for what to do before, during, and after such an event.

Before the Forum

- Decide on the format you will use ahead of time (see "Sample Format for the Candidate Forum," page three).
- In this time of a pandemic, faith communities may choose to hold the forum on an online platform such as Zoom, Facebook, etc. (see "Best Practices for an Online Forum," page four).
- Formulate an event policies and schedule document (see "Sample Rules for the Candidate Forum," page five).
- Invite the candidate(s).
- Send the candidates your event policies and schedule in writing along with the invitation so they will know the rules of engagement.
- Obtain a written and signed acknowledgement that the candidates and/or campaign managers have read the policy.
- Publicize the event — date, time, place, moderator, that it is open to the public, and any other relevant information — in your community.
- Post your rules of engagement in a very visible location where the moderator can refer to them if needed.
- As people enter the event, provide them with paper and pencil to write down questions for the candidates and make clear where these questions are to be deposited.

During the Forum

- Start and end in a timely fashion.
- The moderator should welcome the guests, inform them of the format, and show them the posting of the rules of engagement (see "Sample Welcome and Instructions for the Moderator," page six).
- Stick to your format and rules (see "Sample Instructions for the Timekeeper," page seven).

After the Forum

- Send thank you letters to the participants.

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Sample Documents



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Sample Format of the Candidate Forum

- All questions will be submitted in writing by audience members. Audience questions will be screened by a designated group and given to the moderator. The group and moderator will allow for a broad range of questions but will remove duplicate or similar questions. Additionally, questions submitted must be civil and applicable to all candidates.
- All candidates will have the opportunity to respond to each question.
- Each candidate will be allowed one minute to respond to each question.
- A timekeeper will be used during the forum. They will show a 15-second warning card and STOP card at the appropriate times. Candidates are asked to honor the established time limits and complete their answers when the timekeeper indicates.
- Out of respect for the audience, candidates should respond to the question asked rather than use the time to talk about other subjects. The moderator may remind candidates of this suggestion.
- At the discretion of the moderator, a candidate may request and receive a 30-second rebuttal if that candidate or their position is directly attacked by another candidate.
- All candidates will have the opportunity to give a two-minute closing statement. Candidates may use the time to speak on any subject, but candidates' speeches are to remain civil and should refrain from personal attacks on others.
- Special rules may apply for a candidate running unopposed for a particular office. Notice of these rules will be provided to all candidates at least one week prior to the forum.

Best Practices for an Online Forum

In a pandemic season, holding a forum online may be the appropriate format for a community. Even when in-person gatherings no longer feel risky, there may be advantages to this venue, especially since so many have become accustomed to the accessibility of meeting online. Here are some considerations for such a gathering. While Zoom functionality is assumed, the principles would apply to other platforms as well.

- Communications suggested in this guide for before or during an in-person forum are equally applicable when the forum is held online. Things that would be posted in the room can be posted in the chat and/or by sharing a screen at the start of the session. Guidelines that would be announced “live” should similarly be offered during the online gathering in real time.
- Guidelines for submitting questions should be established and communicated. Participants will likely have the functionality to submit questions in real time through the chat or “Q&A” function, and organizers will have to determine whether to set time limits for such submissions or accept questions throughout the event.
- Consider having the moderator(s) and candidates together in the room with audience members joining online. It will be important to consider technology to make candidates equally visible and audible throughout the event.
- If candidates and moderator(s) are on the Zoom meeting separately, a good option is to use the spotlight function for the moderator(s) and candidates. Spotlight can be found by hovering over the dots at the corner of each person’s image on Zoom. The meeting host can add spotlight to the moderator(s) and the candidates (up to nine people) so participants can view each one equally.
- If candidates and moderator(s) are on Zoom separately, they should leave their video on at all times. They should also mute when they are not speaking.
- Decide whether and how the work of the timekeeper will be visible to online participants. They can also be spotlighted.
- Clarify with candidates whether and how they will be permitted to share any promotional materials, websites, or other information with participants.
- Decide beforehand whether the mute function will be used to cut off candidate answers that extend longer than the allotted time; communicate this decision to candidates and participants.
- Be prepared to mute or dismiss any audience members who do not abide by the rules of the forum. Tell participants you are prepared to do so. In the event of significant and disruptive “Zoom-bombing,” you may need to terminate the forum early.
- Consider and communicate with candidates and participants beforehand whether or not the meeting will be recorded and a link shared for later viewing. If the forum is being recorded, candidates and participants should be made aware of how that recording will be shared.

Sample Rules for the Candidate Forum

All rules are applicable for before, during, and after the forum and will be strictly enforced in order to be fair to all other candidates.

- This is a civil forum intended to educate voters on the issues and candidates' positions. Civility from candidates, campaign staff, volunteers, and audience members is expected at all times.
- Candidates will share tables in a common location to display promotional materials for voters to take home (e.g. fliers, brochures, stickers, yard signs, etc.). Candidates, campaign staff, and volunteers are not allowed to distribute promotional materials beyond the tables (including other parts of the building or parking lot). A forum volunteer will be present to ensure there is room at the tables for everyone; items may be moved or removed by the volunteer if needed. Leftover items must be removed immediately following the event or they will be thrown away.
- Candidates, campaign staff, volunteers, and members of the public are not allowed to wear promotional attire such as t-shirts or hats (buttons are allowed). Please inform your staff and volunteers of this rule. A notice will be posted on the doors.
- Candidates, campaign staff, volunteers, and members of the public are not allowed to use any audio or visual aids such as signs, banners, charts, or other displays.

Sample Welcome and Instructions for the Moderator

OPENING:

Good *Morning/Afternoon/Evening*. I am _____. On behalf of the *sponsoring organization*, I am very pleased to welcome the candidates and each of you to this candidate forum.

We present today's forum because our organization cares about the health of our community, and we want to assist the public in becoming informed about issues and candidate positions.

The candidates present here today are:

- 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- etc.

The format of the forum tonight will be: *read or explain the format of the forum to the participants, including time limits.*

The rules of the forum for candidates and the audience are as follows: *Point to the poster of your rules of engagement and read or summarize it. It would be good to refer back to it as needed during the event if someone does not seem to adhere to the rules.*

I would like to suggest to each candidate that while you may use the full time allowed, please be as succinct as possible in your responses so we might address more questions from the audience.

We strongly encourage you to focus on the question asked and to include solutions you would pursue if you are elected or re-elected.

Let us begin.

The first question goes to....

CLOSING:

I want to thank the audience members for attending tonight's forum and for all the candidates' participation as well. We wish you the best of luck in *next week's* election. Thank you all again for joining us. Please feel free to stay and ask follow-up questions to candidates.

Please remember to vote on *the date of the election*. Thank you all very much.

Sample Instructions for the Timekeeper

Questions — 1 minute

- 15-second warning card
- STOP card

Rebuttals — 30 seconds

- Allowed at moderator's discretion
- 15-second warning card
- STOP card

Closing Statements — 2 minutes

- 15-second warning card
- STOP card

Additional information and further guidelines for houses of worship hosting forums and engaging candidates for public office can be found at [Interfaith Alliance](https://www.interfaithalliance.org/), our national office.

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Faithful Voices for Racial Justice is a project of Interfaith Alliance of Iowa. If you would like more information or would like to join the work, please contact Connie Ryan at connie@interfaithallianceiowa.org.



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