

# Candidate Forum Event Guide



A candidate forum is a public event where candidates are invited to express their positions on a wide range of issues. They are an excellent opportunity for constituents to learn about candidates, and they provide an avenue to educate voters about the issues National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) cares about and for which your section advocates.

While there are several types of candidate forums, NCJW recommends planning an event that gives candidates equal time during a question and answer (Q&A) period and allows for follow-up questions. In this format, an impartial moderator questions the candidates, who are then allotted equal response time. Traditionally, the candidates are unaware of the exact questions but know in advance what topics will be covered. Candidates can be asked different questions if they receive equal time to respond. Further, the moderator may ask clarifying follow-up questions.

**NCJW is a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan organization.** Keeping your candidate forum nonpartisan is easy if you follow the guidelines below:

- Candidates from every major party must be invited. There is a risk that the event could appear partisan if some candidates refuse to participate. Cancel the forum if only one candidate agrees to attend.
- The forum should cover a broad range of topics.
- Candidates should have equal time to present their views and not be asked to pledge or agree with specific positions of the sponsoring organizations.
- The location should be politically neutral.
- The forum must have an independent moderator so as not to favor a specific candidate. The moderator must not imply approval or disapproval of the candidates.
- Use a list of neutral questions (more on that below).
- The forum must not indicate NCJW's views on issues, thereby prejudicing the forum. Any NCJW materials distributed or displayed should not give the organization's position on issues raised in the forum.

The following pages represent a step-by-step guide to holding a successful candidate forum. NCJW thanks Nonprofit VOTE for their published guidance on hosting this type of event.

## Set your goals.

Set goals before your event and evaluate your event afterwards to identify what went well and where to improve. Sample goals include hosting at least 100 community members, deepening your partnerships with other organizations, and educating about your section's priority issues. There are no right answers; think about what makes sense for your community, your organization, and your level of experience.

Make sure your event is an integrated part of your section's Promote the Vote, Protect the Vote campaign. For example, register audience members to vote at the event (when applicable by state). You can also circulate a sign-in list to get names and contact information for follow up/election reminders.

## Plan event logistics.

- **Candidates.** Candidate forums can feature those running for office at the local, state, or federal levels. The higher profile the race or candidates, the further out you should begin planning and inviting candidates.
- **Accessibility.** Keep in mind practicalities like parking, entrances, and public transportation. Make sure the location is completely accessible to persons with disabilities, be they volunteers, candidates, or attendees. It is also best practice to hire ASL translators to ensure that people who are deaf or hard of hearing can also fully participate in the event.
- **Location.** Select a space that is large enough to accommodate your audience and neutral enough to attract a broad range of community members. Example locations include a local school, community center, or library. Consider free or low-cost facilities within your own community. Remember to pick a site that is politically neutral for all candidates.
- **Budget.** Determine a budget by considering the cost of the space and additional technical expenses.
- **Technology and Equipment.** Identify your audio-visual needs. Consider a stage for candidates, sound and broadcasting equipment, and a designated area for journalists/media.
- **Date & Time.** Successful candidate events tend to be held mid-week and in the evening. Be sure to avoid religious or government holidays and dates when other community functions are scheduled.
- **Length.** Build set-up and clean-up time into your plans. Further, consider making time in your event for candidates to meet community members and voters. This may make your event more appealing to those running for office.
- **Partners.** Asking groups to co-sponsor your candidate forum event is a great way to divide tasks, share costs, and boost turnout. Think about groups with whom you already have a great working relationship and other groups with whom you'd like to partner.

## Invite candidates.

Once you have decided whether to invite local, state, or federal candidates, see who in your section might have personal relationships with the candidates running for office. Write a formal letter of invitation and send it via email and in the mail. Remember, all viable candidates must be invited, and the event cannot happen if only one agrees to attend. What makes an event attractive to a candidate is knowing there will be a large audience, time to meet and greet voters, and a promise of neutrality. If the candidates do not know about NCJW, start by educating them on the organization.

Follow up with candidates regularly after they accept the invitation to share event logistics and get final confirmation.

Here is an example invitation from the Minnesota League of Women Voters:

*Dear [Representative/Senator/Honorable/Dr./Last Name]:*

*National Council of Jewish Women Springfield Section (NCJW Springfield) is pleased to invite you to participate in a nonpartisan candidate forum. It will be held on July 15, 2024, at 7pm ET at the Springfield Public Library. As a candidate for state representative, you are invited to participate. The forum will last approximately 90 minutes with time to meet and greet attendees after. The doors will open at 6:30pm ET.*

*NCJW Springfield is a nonpartisan, 501(c)(3) political organization whose mission is to improve the quality of life for women, children, and families and safeguard individual rights and freedoms. We have been educating and engaging voters on the issues we care about since 1988. If you are not familiar with our organization, I encourage you to learn more at [website].*

*The purpose of the candidate forum is to give Springfield voters a chance to hear candidates discuss issues of importance to them in the upcoming election, with a specific focus on gun violence, civil rights, and education. The event is free and open to the public. All candidates from major parties running for office have been invited to attend the forum. We will only hold the forum if all candidates from major parties are able to attend.*

*All candidates will be seated at a table on stage, each with a microphone. The moderator will stand at a podium on the stage. Notepaper, pens, and bottled water will be provided on the table; no other props are allowed. The forum will be livestreamed on NCJW Springfield's Facebook page at [website], and members of the media will be invited to attend. Campaign literature, buttons, signs, clothing, or any other campaign-related items will not be allowed on stage. However, there will be a table outside the room for candidates to place campaign material.*

*NCJW Springfield pledges the event will be unbiased and nonpartisan. The forum will feature a moderator asking candidates pre-determined questions about their policy*

*positions. Each candidate will receive two minutes to respond; time limits will be strictly enforced. The moderator can then ask follow-up questions for clarification.*

*Please confirm your participation with [name] before July 1 by calling [phone] or emailing [email]. We look forward to hearing from you and to your participation in this educational event.*

*Sincerely,*

*[name]*

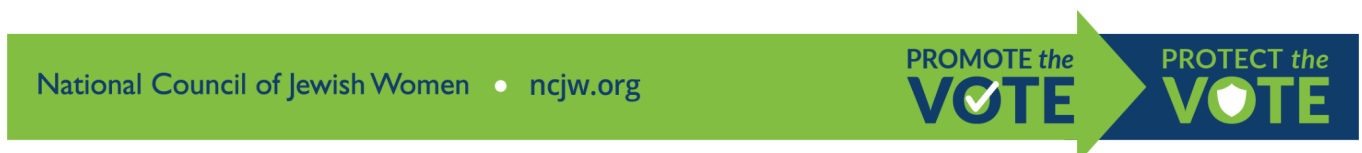
### **Generate an audience.**

Publicize the event in person and online. Spread the word to NCJW advocates in your area via listservs, newsletters, flyers, and social media. Send invitations to community organizations, faith-based communities, coalition members, and other guests. Consider sharing the invitation with trusted journalists, newspapers, and community cable outlets to drive turnout. Collaborate with other local nonprofits to cosponsor the forum, and encourage your partners to advertise to their members and networks. Create a Facebook event early on, and share it widely. Invite event partners as co-hosts on the page, and be sure to share the event link in emails and newsletters.

Sample Facebook text:

*Passionate about the issues and want to know where the candidates running for [office] stand? Want to engage with other community members passionate about democracy? Join NCJW [Section] and [partners] at a candidate forum on [date] at [time] at [location]. Candidates will be sharing their views on issues important to our community, including gun violence, civil rights, and education.*

Sample graphic:



Sample email to invite NCJW advocates and community partners:

*Dear [name],*

*Hear where the [year] candidates for [office] stand on the issues you care about, directly from them! On [time and date], NCJW [section name] and [partners] are hosting candidates [names & parties] at a forum that will cover topics important to our community, including gun violence, civil rights, and education.*

*Join us on [date] at [time] at [location] for this important public forum. [Include location details and anything participants should bring.]*

*We hope to see you on [date] as we engage with our community around these important issues!*

*Best,*

*[name]*

### **Invite local and regional media.**

Once the details of the debate or forum have been finalized, write a press release and distribute it to local media outlets. Notify local newspapers and radio stations about the event and urge them to promote it. Ask candidates to help promote the event in the media and among their supporters. Utilize social media when appropriate.

### **Recruit volunteers.**

There are many roles for volunteers at your candidate forum, including promoting the event, executing it smoothly, and registering people to vote. Assign volunteers to greet audience members and troubleshoot needs/issues. Additionally, assign a staff person or trusted volunteer to greet and escort each candidate.

The most important volunteer roles are forum moderator and timekeepers. The moderator should be a respected member of the community with perceived neutrality and nonpartisanship on the issues. The timekeepers should be volunteers who are organized and feel comfortable interrupting candidates as needed. You will also need a volunteer to film or livestream the event.

### **Collect supplies.**

You may need all or some of the following for your event:

- Nameplates for the candidates and moderator
- Stage with head table, chairs, mics, and podium for moderator
- Audio visual equipment
- Standing mic in the audience for questions
- Signs with Wi-Fi access information posted throughout the venue

- Table skirts and NCJW banner or signage
- Two tables outside the event or at the back of a large event space — one to distribute NCJW swag, materials, and register voters; and one to display candidates' campaign materials
- Sign-in sheet
- Timecards with 1 min, 0 min, Time's Up
- Water & snacks for candidates, moderator, translators, and volunteers

### Determine the questions.

At the heart of the candidate forum are the questions that will be asked. Questions should represent a broad range of interests since a narrow set of issues may suggest support for a particular candidate. Sample questions are linked [here](#).

### Hold your event.

Arrive early to complete set-up, review logistics with volunteers, and verify equipment is working properly. Start the forum by welcoming the audience and introducing the candidates and the moderator. Thank candidates, the moderator, and audience members for coming. The moderator should then take over and review the ground rules for the forum, including that the event is nonpartisan.

### Follow up.

Do not forget to say thanks! Thank participating candidates and the moderator with handwritten thank-you notes. Send a follow-up email to attendees to thank them for coming and offer additional opportunities to get involved with your section.

### Debrief and report-out.

Hold a debrief session with your volunteers after your event to discuss what went well and what could be improved for future events. Capture your discussion in writing so it can be shared with future volunteer teams. Lastly, report your success to your section, board, and NCJW. If your section has a PTV captain, they are responsible for reporting to NCJW; if not, please send a write-up and photos (with captions so we know who is in the pictures) to [action@ncjw.org](mailto:action@ncjw.org).