



## Candidate Forum How-to 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 running to represent them and they provide an avenue to educate voters about the issues NCJW cares about and for which your section advocates.

While there are different 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 allowed equal response time. Traditionally, the candidates are unaware of the exact questions, but know what issues will be covered. Candidates can be asked different questions, as long as they receive equal time to present their views. Further, the moderator may ask follow-up questions to get clarifications from the candidates.

**NCJW, Inc. 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 issues.
- 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.

Below is a step by step guide to holding a successful candidate forum. Thanks to Nonprofit VOTE for their published guidance on hosting this type of event.

#### *Set your goals.*

Set goals for your event and evaluate your event after it's over 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 the section's priority issues . There are no right answers — think about what makes sense for your community and level of experience.

Make sure your event is an integrated part of your section's Promote the Vote, Protect the Vote 2020 campaign. For example, register audience members to vote at the event (where applicable by state). Further, circulate a sign-in list to get names and contact information for follow up and 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 or public transportation. Make sure the location is completely accessible to persons with disabilities, be they volunteers, candidates, or attendees. It's also a 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 large enough to accommodate your audience and that will attract a broad range of community members, such as a local school, community

center, or library. Consider the free or low-cost facilities within your own community and remember to pick a site that is 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, as well as room 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 informally with voters. This may make your event more attractive to those running for office.
- *Partners.* Asking groups to co-sponsor your candidate forum event is a great way to divide tasks and costs, as well as boost turnout. Think both about groups with whom you already have a great working relationship, and about groups with whom you want to build relationships..

#### *Invite candidates.*

Once you've 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.

Thanks to the Minnesota League of Women Voters for their published candidate invitation.

Sample invitation to candidate:

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

The National Council of Jewish Women Springfield Section (NCJW Springfield) is pleased to invite you to attend a nonpartisan candidate forum. It will be held on July 15, 2020 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. 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 for the candidate forum is to give Springfield voters a chance to hear candidates discuss issues of importance to them in the upcoming election, and will focus specifically 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 and 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]

*Turnout the audience.*

Get out the word 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 non-profits to cosponsor the forum, and encourage your partners to advertise to their members and networks.

It is critical you 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] & [partners] at a candidate forum on July 15 at 7pm ET at the Springfield Public Library. Candidates will be sharing their views on issues important to our community, including gun violence, civil rights, and education.

**Sample Graphic**

PROMOTE the  
VOTE

PROTECT the  
VOTE



## CANDIDATE FORUM

Sample email to invite NCJW advocates and community partners:

Dear [name],

Hear where the 2020 candidates for [office] stand on the issues you care about, directly from them! On [time and date], NCJW [section name] & [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].

Hope to see you at [location] on [date] to engage in our community and the issues that matter!

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.

#### *Recruit volunteers.*

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

Perhaps the most important volunteer roles are that of 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
- WiFi information, and signs with the 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
- Time cards with 1 min, 0 min, Time's Up
- Water & snacks for candidates, moderator, and volunteers

#### *Determine the questions*

The heart of the candidate forum is the questions that will be asked of all candidates. Questions should represent a broad range of interests because a narrow set of issues may suggest support for a candidate, particularly if it looks like the answer is being sought to mirror the organization's views on those issues. NCJW, Inc. has sample questions for every issue we care about in Appendix A of this document. Use these questions as-is, or tailor them to your community.

### *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*

Don't forget to say thanks! Thank participating candidates and the moderator with handwritten thank you notes. Send a follow-up e-mail 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. Last, report-out your success to your section, board, and NCJW, Inc. If your section has a PTV 2020 captain, they are responsible for reporting to NCJW, Inc.; if not, please send a write-up and photos (with captions so we know who is in the pictures) to Hannah Cohen Smith at [hcohensmith@ncjw.org](mailto:hcohensmith@ncjw.org).

## Appendix A

### *Reproductive Health, Rights, & Justice*

- Abortion Rights
  - Do you support an individual's right to access abortion, regardless of their income, insurance, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, age, or any other factor? Why or why not? (federal, state)
  - Do you support the Hyde Amendment, which denies coverage of abortion services to those enrolled in federal health programs? Why or why not? (federal)
  - [If your [state's Medicaid program also bans insurance coverage of abortion](#)] What is your position on expanding the state's Medicaid program to include coverage of abortion services? (state, local)
  - Do you believe that young people under 18 should require parental consent to access abortion care? Why or why not? (federal, state)
  - What is your position on fetal personhood policy, which grants civil or human rights and protections to fetuses? (federal, state)
  - Recent changes to Title X prohibit providers from discussing or referring patients for abortions. What is your position on these changes? (federal)
  - Do you support the policy known as the Global Gag Rule, which denies foreign organizations that receive US funds the ability to use their own funding to provide information, referral, or services for legal abortion or to advocate for abortion law reform in their own country? Why or why not? (federal)
- General Health Care and Coverage
  - Do you believe that all individuals should have access to high quality, affordable, nondiscriminatory health coverage? Why or why not? (federal, state)
  - Do you support the full implementation of the Affordable Care Act, including the birth control coverage benefit and Section 1557's protections for patients (protects against discrimination based on sex, gender identity, or prior health care such as abortion)? Why or why not? (federal, state)

- Do you believe that states should be able to subsidize insurance policies that do not meet the Affordable Care Act's minimum coverage requirements or protect patients with pre-existing conditions? Why or why not? (federal, state)
- [If your [state has not expanded Medicaid](#)] Do you support expanding Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act? Why or why not? (state, local)
- What is your position on block granting Medicaid? (federal)
- Do you believe that health care providers, hospital systems, and insurance companies should be able to refuse to provide care or coverage based on religious or moral beliefs? Why or why not? (federal, state)
- Do you believe that employers should be able to refuse to provide their employees with insurance that covers birth control services if doing so goes against their religious or moral belief? Why or why not? (federal, state)

#### *Federal Courts*

- What kinds of nominees do you believe the president should nominate to lifetime seats on the federal bench? (federal)
- What characteristics do you think a judicial nominee should hold in order to be "qualified"? What types of professional experiences should they have? (federal)
- Do you believe it is important that federal judges reflect the diverse communities they serve? Why or why not? (federal)
- Do you think the Senate should confirm judicial nominees to lifetime seats on federal courts if the American Bar Association has found them not qualified? Why or why not? (federal)
- In your opinion, what is the role of the federal courts in our political system? (federal, state)

#### *Voter Engagement*

- Do you believe that there are discriminatory barriers to voting in your state? If yes, what steps would you take to remove those barriers? (federal, state, local)
- Do you support voter registration reforms, such as automatic voter registration or same-day voter registration? Why or why not? (federal, state)
- Do you believe that people convicted of a felony should lose their right to vote? If yes, how and when do you think those rights should be restored, if at all? (state)

- Do you support the creation of an independent redistricting commission for your state? Why or why not? (state)
- How should local government determine the location and number of voting sites? What about accessibility? Number of residents (to avoid long lines)?

### *Israel*

- What do you believe the role of the US should be in achieving peace in the Middle East? (federal)
- Do you support a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict? Why or why not? (federal)
- What is your position on annexation of the West Bank or parts of it? (federal)
- Do you think that US military and/or economic aid to Israel should be conditioned, leveraged or regulated in any way? If yes, explain. (federal)
- Do you believe funding should be restored to Palestinian entities? Do you think there should be a Palestinian Mission in Washington? Why or why not? (federal)
- Do you support boycotts, divestment, or sanctions (BDS) targeting Israel? Why or why not? What about boycotting items produced in Israeli settlements over the “Green Line”? (federal, state, local)
- What is your position on individuals or organizations that support boycotts or divestment targeting Israel? (federal, state, local)
- What is your position on federal, state, or local anti-BDS legislation? Do these bills impact free speech? (federal, state, local)

### *Civil Rights*

- Do you believe white supremacist violence is increasing in the United States? What steps would you take to combat white supremacy? (federal, state, local)
- What is your position on capital punishment? (federal, state)
- What steps do you think we should take to address police brutality against communities of color and marginalized communities? (federal, state, local)
- Do you support full equality and protections for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals, couples, and families? Why or why not? (federal, state, local)
- How would you ensure that federal laws against discrimination in housing, education, and employment are effectively enforced? (federal)

- What do you believe are reasonable remedies to address rising hate crimes and incidents in the US? (federal, state, local)
- Do you support legislation protecting LGBTQ employees from discrimination at work? Why or why not? (federal, state, local)
- Do you support increased inclusion in all parts of society for individuals with disabilities? Why or why not? If yes, what policies would you support to achieve this goal? (federal, state, local)
- Do you support programs that foster diversity in our nation's colleges and universities? Why or why not? (federal, state, local)

### *Sex Trafficking*

- Do you support laws to vacate or expunge the criminal records of trafficking survivors? Why or why not? (state)
- What is your position on Safe Harbor laws, which prevent minors (any child under 18) from being prosecuted for prostitution? (state)

### *Gun Violence Prevention*

- Do you support expanding background checks for all gun sales? Why or why not? (federal)
- Would you support federal legislation to allow for concealed carry? Why or why not? (federal)
- Should the federal government have a role in reducing gun violence? If yes, what is that role? (federal)
- Where do you stand on red flag laws (laws that allow law enforcement or a family member to temporarily remove a firearm from someone who poses a danger to themselves or others)? (federal, state)
- Are there gun violence prevention measures you do not support? If yes, what are some examples? (federal, state, local)
- Do you support closing loopholes that allow individuals convicted of stalking and domestic violence misdemeanors to purchase guns? Why or why not? If yes, how? (federal, state)
- Do you think that assault weapons and high-capacity magazines should be banned? Why or why not? (federal, state, local)

### *Economic Justice*

- Do you think that the minimum wage should be increased? What about the tipped minimum wage? If yes, to what rate? (federal, state)
- Do you think that workers should have access to comprehensive paid family and medical leave? Why or why not? If yes, how long should that leave be? (federal, state, local)?
- Do you think that workers should have access to paid sick days? Why or why not? If yes, how many days? (federal, state, local)?
- What steps would you take to close the wage gap for women and people of color (federal, state, local)
- Share some ideas of how you would address and prevent workplace harassment and empower workers. (federal)

#### *Religious Freedom*

- Do you think that government-funded programs should be able to discriminate based on sexual orientation, gender identity, sex, or religion? Why or why not? (federal, state)
- Under what circumstances do you believe that public taxpayer dollars may be used to fund services provided by religious or religiously affiliated institutions, if any? (federal, state)
- What is your position on private school vouchers, including tuition tax credits and education savings accounts? (federal, state)
- Do you think that an employer's religious beliefs should impact the health care their employees receive? Why or why not? (federal, state)
- Do you believe that religious or moral beliefs should dictate which customers a business serves? Why or why not? (federal, state, local)

#### *Human Needs*

- What is your position on enacting work requirements for human needs or federal assistance programs, such as Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)? (federal)
- Do you support increased funding for human needs programs, such as Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition

Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP)? Why or why not? (federal)

- What are your budget priorities? How would they affect women, children, and families in communities across the US/our state? (federal, state, local)
- Do you believe there should be conditions for receiving federal or state needs-based funding or grants? Why or why not? (federal, state)

### *Immigration and Refugees*

- Do you support a path to citizenship for immigrants without legal status (such as those in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program; those from countries with Temporary Protected Status (TPS); or those with Deferred Enforced Departure (DED))? If yes, what steps would you take to achieve this? (federal)
- What is your position on the country’s recent changes to asylum, including as “Remain in Mexico,” the third-country ban, or accelerated processing? (federal)
- How would you describe the situation at the southern border of the United States? What policies would you recommend to change the situation? (federal)
- Does the nation benefit from more immigrants, or from fewer immigrants? Why? (federal, state, local)
- Does the United States accept too many refugees? Too few? Explain. (federal, state, local)
- Do you support policies that provide affordable health care, including access to abortion care, for all immigrants? Why or why not? (federal, state)
- Do you think that some immigrants/refugees should get priority to come to the United States based on their religion? What about their country of origin? Education level? (federal, state)
- What role should local law enforcement play in enforcing immigration laws? (federal, state, local)
- Would you support refugees moving to your state/community? (state, local)

### *Gender-Based and Sexual Violence*

- Do you support reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act with expanded protections? If yes, what are the gaps that you see and what protections for survivors would you prioritize? (federal)

- Does the Department of Education's have a role be in addressing sexual assault on college campuses? If so, what is their role? (federal)
- How do you think colleges and universities should handle sexual assault and rape allegations? (federal, state, local)
- How will you ensure that all survivors of sexual violence receive the protection and services they need? (federal, state)