



Interfaith Power & Light
Putting Faith Into **Action** for a Safe Climate

A HOW-TO GUIDE FOR
FACILITATING
FAITH COMMUNITY-BASED
CANDIDATE FORUMS

Three interlocking gears of different sizes are positioned to the right of the text. The largest gear is at the top, with two smaller gears below it, one to the left and one to the right.

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GUIDE AT A GLANCE

This resource will help you do the following as you plan a faith community-based candidate forum ahead of an election:

- Identify the candidates that should be invited based on geographic scope (e.g., local vs. state vs. national office), timeframe, etc.
- Form an event committee
- Choose a venue and a date
- Invite co-sponsors to collaborate
- Invite candidates and make other event arrangements
- Promote your event
- Host and manage the forum
- Plan for and execute follow-up with attendees and participants



FAITH VOTES

A Nonpartisan Campaign of Interfaith Power & Light

This resource is part of Interfaith Power & Light's nonpartisan Faith Votes Campaign, which inspires and mobilizes people of faith and conscience to express their faithful values through voting.

Voting is at the core of civic participation, and IPL encourages people of ALL faiths and creeds to participate in ALL elections. It's more important than ever to be an election mobilizer—casting your own vote is vital, and helping others effectively participate in our democracy is imperative.

FACILITATING CANDIDATE FORUMS

IN YOUR FAITH COMMUNITY



A candidate forum is an important way for people of faith to increase their communities' understanding of the electoral process and the individuals seeking public office. In contrast to an issue forum which, in the faith community, focuses on intractable social issues and relates them to religious social teachings, a candidate forum is an opportunity to learn about people—specifically, candidates for office.

A candidate forum:

- Creates a safe space in which candidates have equal opportunity to share their perspectives on key issues
- Gives candidates an opportunity to communicate their platforms and engage with constituents
- Helps people of faith draw connections between salient policy issues and religious social teachings in a way that doesn't usually happen at secular community events
- Gathers people together to learn
- Builds awareness of your faith community and the people you serve
- Equips community members with vital knowledge as they navigate the election season

So you want to plan a candidate forum? IPL can be a resource to you and your planning team as you move forward. This guide presents some ideas to get you started.

KEEPING YOUR FORUM NONPARTISAN

As you start to plan your candidate forum, remember: Nonpartisanship is essential. Not only is it required by the IRS for all 501(c)(3) organizations, which include faith-based organizations and faith communities, but it also encourages candidates to attend, attracts more interest from the media, and allows for greater, more nuanced focus on policy issues rather than political platforms.

BASIC GUIDELINES FOR STAYING NONPARTISAN

1. The forum should cover a range of issues
2. Candidates should have equal time to present their views
3. Candidates are asked about issues, but not asked to pledge to or agree with specific positions or values of the sponsoring organization(s)
4. The moderator stays neutral and does not imply approval or disapproval of the candidates

INVITING CANDIDATES



To ensure that you are creating a level, neutral space for candidates to express their views, invite all viable candidates for a specific office to your forum and make an equal effort to encourage each of them to attend.

What about a race with several candidates?

At least two candidates must attend to make a forum. You may want to ensure that the front runners can attend, but having any two or more is enough to ensure that you are not explicitly or implicitly endorsing one candidate over another.

What about a last-minute cancellation?

If it is a two-candidate race and one cancels with very little notice, or worse, doesn't show up, you may cancel or go forward with the forum as planned. If you proceed, make sure to publicly announce that this in no way signifies the endorsement of the attending candidate by your organization.

ASKING QUESTIONS



If you choose a forum model in which candidates answer audience questions, you should have at least one designated staff person or volunteer who reviews audience questions before passing them to the moderator. Questions should be thoughtful, issue-focused, and pointed, and should certainly not indicate a strong bias for or against a candidate.

LAYING THE GROUND RULES



What not to wear: partisan attire. While not required, you may want to ask audience members to check their partisan materials (e.g., hats, shirts, signs, etc.) at the door. In addition, you may ask the audience to respectfully refrain from displays of approval (e.g., clapping, whooping, etc.) for or against a particular candidate.

SELECTING A LOCATION



Faith communities are naturally well-positioned to host candidate forums on neutral ground— at a place of worship. The location should not be associated with any party, candidate, or overt political advocacy for any issue.

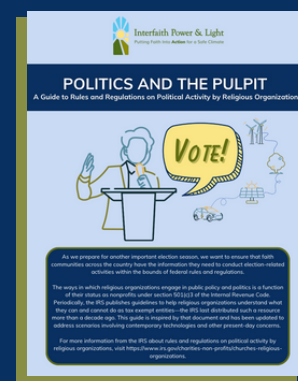
DISTRIBUTING EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS & CAMPAIGN LITERATURE



At your forum, you can (and should!) provide nonpartisan voter education, registration, and GOTV materials for your audience. Place any and all campaign literature that candidates bring on a separate table outside of the room where the forum takes place.

HAVE OTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT YOU SHOULD AND SHOULDN'T DO AS A 501(C)(3) RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATION HOSTING A CANDIDATE FORUM?

Check out IPL's resource [Politics and the Pulpit: A Guide to Rules and Regulations on Political Activity by Religious Organizations](#).



CRAFTING A COMPELLING FORUM

Much like a good issue forum, a faith community-based candidate forum should address public policy issues that are:

TIMELY



Current issues include topics that are in the news and/or that governing bodies are considering. In addition, these issues should have some bearing on your community or other communities you care about. It's important to make the discussion topics broad enough so that all candidates can contribute to rich discussion. However, don't make them so broad that the conversation becomes unfocused. For example, "Education in Fort Bend County" would be too broad a prompt for candidates running for a local school board— "Wraparound Support for Students with Basic Needs" or "Teacher Retention Measures in FBISD" would be two of various ways to refine the topic.

OF BROAD RELIGIOUS SOCIAL CONCERN



A faith community-based forum should address issues that are of religious concern. For example, agricultural exemptions might matter to individuals in a faith community who have farms and ranches, but they have tenuous connections to religious social concerns.

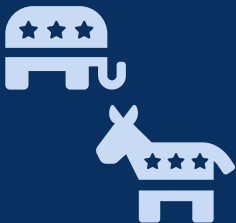
Sometimes, and especially in the context of local elections, a faith community might choose to address religious social concerns about an otherwise secular issue. For instance, you might decide to include questions about local drainage infrastructure in a forum that includes candidates for Houston City Council since there may be disparate flooding impacts in economically disadvantaged areas vs. higher income areas in your community.

COMPLEX



If everyone is in agreement about a particular issue, it's hard to generate meaningful and enlightening dialogue. Similarly, issues that only have one possible solution (e.g., raising taxes) won't yield a robust discussion. During your planning process, pay special attention to the way you and collaborators frame the issues that candidates will address.

NONPARTISAN



In a similar vein, be sure that your questions are not leading and do not imply specific answers. Stay away from partisan language and words/phrases that have strong partisan connotations. Remember to ask the candidates what they think about issues, not what their party or supporters may believe.

UNDERSTANDING CANDIDATES' WANTS

GARNERING A LARGE AUDIENCE

Candidates are often spread thin during campaign season and cannot attend every event to which they are invited. You and your co-sponsors should focus on event turnout and be sure to communicate your expected audience size to candidates in advance. They'll be incentivized to participate if they understand that you have reach and sway in your community.

GUARANTEEING NEUTRALITY

No one wants to walk into a trap. Candidates will avoid events where they could be ganged up on—especially if the media is expected to attend. Remind candidates that your forum is explicitly nonpartisan and share ground rules you establish to keep a level playing field.

EMPHASIZING YOUR FAITH COMMUNITY'S ROLE IN THE COMMUNITY

Often, faith communities are seen as trusted intermediaries among their members and other folks in the surrounding community. Candidates will want to know that the forum is sponsored by an established, reputable organization that has meaningful relationships with its neighbors. Be sure to explain your faith community's (and co-sponsoring organizations') history, mission, and values. You may also consider summarizing any previous or ongoing collaborations with broader networks, advocacy organizations, etc.

ALLOWING TIME FOR INFORMAL INTERACTIONS

After the forum, candidates can have an informal meet-and-greet with attendees. Make sure candidates are notified of this in their invitation to the forum.

FINDING COLLABORATORS

Other organizations can be critical partners in planning and hosting an effective candidate forum. Though one or two organizations typically take the lead, co-sponsors might want to be quite involved in forum planning and may want to assign a member to the event committee. Most of the time, co-sponsors leave the “heavy-lifting” to the primary organizers and simply promote the event, contribute volunteers, offer name recognition, and more.

In the case of candidate forums, remember that your co-sponsors should also have some stake in the election in question. More often than not, they should, like you, have relationships with constituents of the office that's to be filled.



There are four kinds of organizations that your faith community should consider asking to co-sponsor your candidate forum:

PEERS

Other local faith communities in your area. Consider setting a goal of having some degree of religious diversity in your co-sponsors.

VERTICAL TEAMS

Groups that your faith community relates to on a regional, state, or national level such as your district, cluster, or regional organization for your faith community.

COLLEAGUES

Groups you work with locally that are not faith communities, such as your local ministerial alliance or a charity you partner with in the community.

FRIENDS

Groups your faith community belongs to or makes common cause with at the state or local level.

It's your responsibility to gauge and set expectations around the potential level of involvement from co-sponsors. At a minimum, co-sponsors promote the event. For instance, if the regional organization for your faith community co-sponsors your event, make sure they send notices about the forum to the whole organization and any specific email lists like "clergy" or "social action chairs."

MAXIMIZING TURNOUT

SELECT A TITLE THAT DOESN'T SOUND LIKE YOU ARE PROMOTING A PARTICULAR AGENDA OR ENDORSING A CERTAIN KIND OF CANDIDATE.

Your nonpartisanship is a strength— this is a chance for your audience and the media to hear from candidates in a nonpartisan setting rather than receive stock messages from the campaign trail.

HIGHLIGHT KEY ELECTION DATES OR CAMPAIGN NEWS TO ENSURE THAT FOLKS KNOW THIS IS A TIMELY EVENT.

LEVERAGE PARTNERS AND MEDIA OUTLETS THAT HAVE FEATURED YOUR COMMUNITY IN THE PAST.

FRAME YOUR FORUM AS A COMMUNITY EVENT THAT BRINGS VOTERS AND RESIDENTS TOGETHER TO ENGAGE IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS AND EXPRESS THEIR VALUES THROUGH ELECTORAL ACTION.

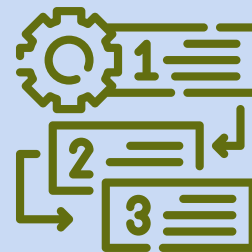
USE CONSISTENT MESSAGING.

Have a short and long description of the forum and distribute these consistently everywhere you promote the forum so that community members see the language repeated.

PROMOTE, PROMOTE, PROMOTE.

Use all of your and your co-sponsors' communication channels. Try to have your online and print messaging in at least two news cycles— that means if your faith community has a monthly newsletter, you should try to get the information to your editor in time to have the announcement appear in two successive editions before the event.

3 BASIC CANDIDATE FORUM MODELS



MODEL 1: EQUAL TIME Q&A

In this model, an impartial moderator and/or panelists question the candidates, who are allowed equal response time. Typically, the candidates are unaware of the exact questions but know the stated focus(es) of the program. Candidates may answer the same questions or may be asked different questions, as long as each is given equal time to present their point of view.

KEYS



- Make sure the planning committee and other organizers create robust, pointed questions ahead of time and coach the moderator on the questions and format of the forum.
- Make sure that there's a designated timekeeper who is prompting the candidates to wrap up their responses and signaling the moderator to ask new questions and move between candidates.

PROS

This format offers predictability in terms of the flow and content of questions and ensures regular transitions between candidates.

CONS

There's little opportunity for audience participation, and candidates don't get to learn about constituents' priorities through questions generated by attendees in real time.

MODEL 2: FOLLOW UP Q&A

In this approach, the moderator and/or panelists ask the candidates questions. To get clarification and more specific answers, follow up questions are permitted.

KEYS



- Make sure the planning committee and other organizers craft potential follow up questions to the primary questions that can be adapted/tweaked as candidates share their thoughts.
- Make sure that the follow up questions speak to the most salient and/or up-for-debate points that the candidates make during their initial responses.

PROS

This model accommodates deeper probing on topics of interest and gives candidates the opportunity to expand upon and nuance their perspectives.

CONS

Allowing follow-up questions means opening the door for potential tangents and candidates taking up disproportionate air time.

MODEL 3: TOWN HALL Q&A

Members of the audience submit all questions to the moderator, and a selection of these questions are presented to the candidates.

KEYS



- Make sure to designate members of the planning committee and other organizers as question screeners! These people should be prepared to weed out partisan questions and select only those that will facilitate substantive dialogue.

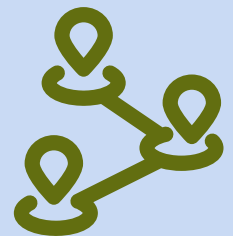
PROS

Audience members are actively engaged in the forum and candidates learn about their constituents' concerns and priorities.

CONS

This can be a heavy lift for organizers, who are responsible for culling questions in real time and sharing them with the moderator.

SAMPLE CANDIDATE FORUM TEMPLATE



BRIEF FORUM DESCRIPTION

New Life Presbyterian Church, in collaboration with Park Place Interfaith Alliance, will host a forum of 2024 Pleasanton mayoral candidates. Candidates will address important questions about gun violence, public schools, and clean air. Attendees will have the opportunity to submit questions about the above topics and hear from each candidate. At a follow-up event next month, the same organizers will host an interfaith conversation about what people of faith in Pleasanton can do next to hold the future mayor accountable.

FORUM GUIDELINES FOR CANDIDATE DISCUSSION

All questions on the predetermined topics will be submitted in writing by audience members. Audience questions will be screened by members of the forum planning committee and given to the moderator. The committee 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.

*Notice of these rules will be provided to all candidates at least one week prior to the forum.

FORUM GUIDELINES FOR CANDIDATE PROMOTION

These forum rules should be endorsed by all planning committee members and co-sponsors and shared with candidates ahead of the event. Ask candidates to formally acknowledge and agree to the rules. In addition, the planning committee should consider having the moderator read these rules aloud at the forum prior to the conversation so that audience members are aware of expectations. 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. 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.

MODERATOR WELCOME & INSTRUCTIONS

OPENING

Good Morning/Afternoon/Evening. I am _____. On behalf of the sponsoring organization, I am pleased to welcome the candidates and each of you to this candidate forum. We present today's forum because our faith community cares about the wellbeing of our community, and we want to help people in our community be informed about key 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: Read the ground 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 can address additional 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 for attending tonight's forum and for all the candidates' participation as well. We wish you the best of luck in the upcoming election. Thank you all again for joining us. Please feel free to stay and ask follow-up questions to candidates, and please remember to vote! Thank you all very much.



QUICK FORUM TO-DO LIST

3 MONTHS IN ADVANCE

- Invite the candidates and brief them on the forum
- Create a communications plan

1 MONTH IN ADVANCE

- Confirm candidates' attendance
- Confirm site arrangements
- Confirm volunteers
- Confirm moderator

DAY OF FORUM

- Complete set-up
- Review ground rules
- Staff sign-in table
- Host informal mingling time after the official program

4 MONTHS IN ADVANCE

- Identify other organizations as co-sponsors
- Set the date, time, and place for the forum
- Decide on a forum format
- Develop a budget

2 MONTHS IN ADVANCE

- Create and start implementing a plan for garnering turnout (including media placements and publicity)
- Begin volunteer recruitment
- Select a moderator
- Continue follow up with candidates

2-3 WEEKS IN ADVANCE

- Build the audience! Keep recruiting attendees
- Confirm various volunteer duties
- Ramp up communications
- Finalize logistics
- Select a timekeeper

1 WEEK POST FORUM

- Send thank-yous to candidates, moderator, co-sponsors, and volunteers
- Follow up with your audience and partners by sending coverage and highlights from the forum

The information you collect about the reach of your faith community's voter information booth will help you plan future voter engagement efforts and help IPL understand the scope of the faith-based voter engagement efforts conducted by faith communities utilizing our resources!

Please complete IPL's
Voter Engagement Activity Report
to ensure that your vital voter engagement efforts are factored into the collective faith-based voter engagement work that's underway across our country.

**SCAN THE CODE TO
ACCESS THE FORM!**



Or visit
<https://bit.ly/voterform24>



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