



Facilitation of Civil Discourse in Candidate Forums/Debates

*Be advised that this is a work in progress.
Consult LWVC for further updates.*

Understanding the League's policy on candidate forums/debates

The League is a nonpartisan organization by history and by law.

— LWV does not support or oppose candidates or political parties. It has always been so.

— LWVC is a 501(c)(3) (Internal Revenue Code) organization that is allowed to conduct education activities such as candidate forums/debates as long as it does not “does not participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of any candidate for public office.”

— To comply with the 501(c)(3) requirement any candidate event must be nonpartisan in appearance. That is why LWVC does not allow campaign material inside the room in which the candidates speak, why questions to candidates must cover a variety of issues, why there should be no empty chair forums, why we ask the audience to refrain from applause and cheering other than at the end of the event to thank the candidates for appearing. LWV must avoid the appearance that it is promoting a particular

— Federal Election & Federal Communications Commissions rules govern broadcasting and specifically prohibit empty chair debates in federal elections. It is recommended that the same rule be applied to all debates at state and local levels to comply with federal law. (LWVUS recommendation too)

—The First Amendment to the US Constitution prevents the government from abridging or prohibiting speech. LWV is not the government; is not prohibiting speech, merely moving it outside the room; and is complying with federal law when it asks people to leave their partisan activities outside of the room.

Self preparation

Review and understand the signed candidate agreements and co-sponsorship agreements.

Prepare yourself for potential problems by reviewing the suggestions below.

Understand that there are no “magic words” that will end disruptions and rude behavior, but there are things that you can try.

Remember you can call a recess of the event to consult with League members, co-sponsors and candidates.

Remember you can end the event.

Do not beat yourself up for whatever decision is made. You are human and doing the best you can.

Prepare the Audience

This event is:

- designed to give the audience the opportunity to see and listen to candidates.
- designed to give candidates equal time to respond to questions.
- sponsored (or co-sponsored) by the League of Women Voters of _____. The League does not support or oppose candidates or political parties.
- governed by the candidates signed agreements to participate and agreeing to the ground rules for the event and the conduct of the people involved.

Explain the rules of conduct for the event. You might start with something like this:

“Tonight’s candidate forum rules call for civility on the part of both candidates and the audience. The hallmark of democracy is the willingness of our community to treat each other with courtesy and respect. It is in that spirit that we are here this evening to engage in a vital part of our democratic process, a civilized discussion of the important issues that confront our communities.”

Point out any planned videoing and broadcasting of the event. Be sure to say that the League will run video with no editing, from beginning to end in compliance with Federal Communications Commission rules.

At any event, ask audience members not to videotape and announce that “*The League is not responsible for the content of any recording that is not arranged for or agreed to by the League.*” You might add that “*If you see fragments or pieces of this event, other than in a formal news report, you can rest assured that LWV did not authorize it.*” Say this at the beginning and end of the event. Announce that frequently if you see lots of cell phones popping up.

Problem situations

See <http://archive.lwvc.org/lwvonly/elections/index.html> the Voter Service Manual, Appendix 6 for general “what to do if…” scenarios.

What to do if:

— audience member is waving campaign sign. *“Sir, Ma’am Please respect the rules of this event. Campaign material cannot be displayed in this room.”*

OR *“Sir, Ma’am Please put the sign down. It is difficult for people around you to see the candidates.”*

OR *“Sir, Ma’am Please put the sign down. It is distracting to the audience and the candidates and is against the rules we laid out at the beginning of the evening.”* This may take repeated admonitions.

If this is repeated, consider calling a recess to huddle with the candidates and perhaps ask the candidate who is identified by the sign to ask the audience member to put the sign down.

— audience member is cheering, clapping, woo hoo-ing. *“I remind the audience that we will hold our applause and sounds until the end of this event.”*

OR *“Sir, Ma’am Please do not (identify the behavior) The point of this evening to listen to the candidates answer questions. The people around you cannot hear the candidates.”*

— audience members are generally rowdy and disruptive. *“This is not a rally for supporters but a nonpartisan forum for those who want to hear from the candidates/speakers. Please, let’s give the candidates/speakers the opportunity to speak and not take up their time.”*

OR *“Please be quiet. People are here to listen to the candidates please respect their need to hear.”*

OR *“Please, let’s not waste time that should be spent discussing the issues.”*

If this is repeated, consider calling a recess to huddle with the candidates and perhaps ask the candidate(s) who is (are) identified by the sign to ask the audience member to put the sign down.

— audience members are videoing the event *“I remind everyone that this event is already being taped which will be played on [channel whatever or website or Facebook page] or is being streamed on [name site]. No one else is authorized to tape.”*

OR *“Please refrain from personal taping. We ask for that courtesy on behalf of the candidates and the League. We do not want what is said to be misrepresented by incomplete replays or edited video that misrepresents the nonpartisan nature of this event.”*

AND *“The League is not responsible for the content of any recording that is not arranged for or agreed to by the League. If you see fragments or pieces of this event, other than in a formal news report, you can rest assured that LWV did not authorize it.”*

— candidate or verbal question from audience that is a personal attack on a candidate. *“Sir, Ma’am That answer is out of order because it is contrary to the agreement you made to refrain from denigrating fellow candidates. We are here to listen to answers to questions.”*

If your candidate agreement establishes a right to rebut in the event of an out of order attack, point out to candidates and audience that candidate will have additional time to rebut.