

DEBATES and FORUMS: FORMATS

Traditional or Formal

This kind of debate begins with a “proposition” or “resolution,” a statement of opinion on an issue. Each candidate addresses the proposition in an opening statement/response; each candidate then has an opportunity to rebut or respond to the statement.

Proposition is read	(e.g.) 2 minutes
Opening statement - Candidate A	(e.g.) 2-4 minutes
Opening statement - Candidate B	(e.g.) 2-4 minutes
Rebuttal - Candidate A	1 minute
Rebuttal - Candidate B	1 minute
(Counter Rebuttals are an option)	
Closing Statement - Candidate A	2 minutes
Closing Statement - Candidate B	2 minutes

Variations include:

- candidates each submit several propositions in advance; the sponsor chooses one from each candidate.
- after the opening statements and rebuttals, the candidates question each other (a format developed at the University of Oregon).

Question-and-Answer with Timed Responses

This "classic" debate formula is perhaps the most familiar. A moderator or panelist addresses a question to a candidate and the candidate has a set time to respond.

Sometimes each candidate is expected to answer each question:

Question # 1 to Candidate A	30 seconds
Candidate A responds	2 minutes
Question # 1 to Candidate B, rephrased if necessary	30 seconds
Candidate B responds	2 minutes
Question # 1 to Candidate C, rephrased if necessary	30 seconds
Candidate C responds	2 minutes

Sometimes each candidate gets a different question:

Question # 1 to Candidate A	30 seconds
Candidate A responds	2 minutes
Question # 2 to Candidate B	30 seconds
Candidate B responds	2 minutes
Question # 3 to Candidate C	30 seconds
Candidate C responds	2 minutes

Variations/improvements:

- rebuttals — give candidates the opportunity to give a timed response to an opponent's answer.
- follow-up questions — allow the moderator or panelist to ask related follow-up questions to probe for more in-depth answers or non-evasive responses.
- candidate follow-up questions — provide an opportunity for candidates to ask opponents questions that are directly related to the opponent's response.
- "jump ball" questions — the "jump ball" technique is especially useful in multi-candidate debates. The moderator or panelist poses a question and each candidate has the opportunity to respond. Candidates may (1) use all the allotted time for a detailed answer, (2) briefly indicate agreement or disagreement with another candidate or (3) choose not to answer. The moderator may encourage reluctant candidates to participate and try to keep any candidates from dominating the debate.

Cumulative Time Format

The League is indebted to Don Noel of *The Hartford Courant* for introducing us to the concept of cumulative time for debates. Over time our experience has led us to vary his approach somewhat but his original concept is still here.

This format is designed to enable candidates to elaborate freely on their approaches to a variety of issues, unimpeded by the strict time constraints of a more traditional debate format. The LWVCT has found this format promotes interchange between candidates, allows them to hold each other to account, and keeps the voters' interest while enabling them to see the difference between the candidates.

Each candidate, when speaking, is timed by his or her own timekeeper and each cumulative time is kept. Periodically, generally whenever one candidate stops speaking and another begins, all the timekeepers simultaneously hold up their signs indicating the amount of time used by each candidate. The moderator and the candidates see how their time usage compares, and the candidates can self-moderate to balance any significant discrepancies in time usage. In addition, from time to time the moderator may inform candidates if sizable discrepancies appear to be developing, so that candidates who are behind may avail themselves of the opportunity to use more time. This format encourages candidates to respond as briefly as desired on a topic deemed less important or on which there is no disagreement and to use the allotted time to discuss more fully subjects considered more important.

Candidates are encouraged to rebut and sur-rebut, responding to their differences as they perceive them, understanding that the "clock is running." In this format candidates have the opportunity to hold each other to account rather than having this role assumed by the moderator and/or panelists. The moderator simply reminds the candidates of the clock and moves to another question when the topic appears exhausted. Candidates are not allowed to "save up" time during the questioning and use it to make a speech at the end.

Each round of discussion is initiated by the moderator/one of the members of the panel. The same question is addressed to each candidate before direct debate between/among candidates is invited. Candidates take turns being first to respond to the question.

Each candidate has a set time, usually two minutes, for a closing statement. The order of precedence is determined by lot prior to the debate. Either 1) the winner chooses his position for the order of the closing statements, and the same order is used to begin the questioning, or 2) the winner chooses his position for responding to the opening question, and the order of closing statements is determined by who would have been next in the rotation if questioning had continued.

Modified Cumulative Time Format

(This format can be modified to fit most debates of any length of time.)

Source: Mark Russak presented a variant of this “Example of Generic Modified Cumulative Time Format Candidate Letter” in his Voter Service Workshop at LWVCT Convention 2003.

Numbers are drawn from a hat to determine the order of answering the first question. The same order is used for summations.

There are no opening statements. After introduction of the candidates by the moderator, the questions will immediately begin. At the end of the debate, a 2-minute summation /rebuttal is allowed.

Each candidate will answer each question in 2 minutes or less. A timer will hold up a card indicating the amount of time remaining at 30 seconds, 15 seconds and then 0.

Each candidate will have a “bank” of time that can be drawn on to elaborate on a response or to use for rebuttals. All elaborations and rebuttals are deducted from bank time regardless of how much time was used to initially answer the question. The bank should be at least 2 minutes long and could be up to 15 minutes long

Each candidate is assigned his or her own bank timer who will keep the candidate and moderator apprised of how much time is left in the bank after each round of questions by holding up a sign. There is one other time keeper keeping track of the 2 minutes used to initially answer the questions and for the summations. The moderator should introduce each candidate to his or her timekeeper and make sure that everyone can see her without difficulty.

Please note that this is not an exact time limited format. The purpose here is to allow discussion of the issues. Time saved on answers and rebuttals is used to ASK MORE QUESTIONS, and not added to a candidate’s bank. There will be time for about 7 to 10 questions — more if less time than allotted is used.

As the end of the debate nears, bank time not used by candidates may be used at the moderator’s discretion for additional questions. All decisions by the moderator regarding time, when an issue is exhausted, appropriate discussion, or anything else, are final.

The entire forum will last at least one and not longer than two hours.

Some questions should be prepared in advance by the sponsors and solicited from the public and newspaper reporters. The audience may submit written questions. These questions will be screened by a bipartisan panel for appropriateness and duplication; all questions must be phrased so that they are issue orientated and can be appropriately answered by all candidates. Similar questions may be combined.

“Limited Rebuttal” Formats

Suggested by Ian McMillan and used by several local Leagues, including the LWVs of the Bridgeport Area and Weston.

In debates or forums with a very large number of candidates, there may not be time to give every candidate a chance to rebut on every question. In such cases the League may choose to prohibit rebuttals completely or to limit each candidate to one or two rebuttals, to be used (or not) at the candidate’s discretion. It will be up to the moderator to keep track of which candidates have used such rebuttals; some Leagues give each candidate one or two 3x5 rebuttal cards to surrender to the moderator when used.

If the debate is traditionally timed, the time for each rebuttal should be determined beforehand; 30 seconds to 1 minute should be sufficient. If the debate is “cumulative” the time for each rebuttal should be deducted from the rebutting candidate’s time bank.

Round Robin Format

Source: Mark Russak presented this "Sample of a Round Robin Format" at the Voter Service Workshop at LWVCT Convention 2003.

Preliminary Note:

The problem with the Round-Robin format is that the candidates can not all be heard on all questions. However, the format works well for "issue" debates or forums (including those outside of election season), when the different parties have different views on a particular issue, such as charter revision, and where clarity may be increased by each side's selection of speakers on particular aspects of the issue being debated.

Sample Round-Robin format for a 2-hour debate with 16 candidates. Seven issues will be addressed (more if time allows). 14 minutes will be allotted for each issue. One candidate from each party will be selected by lot to answer the first question and lot will also decide the order they will start. Each candidate will give a one-minute closing statement (optional). Lot will also decide the two candidates starting the closing statements.

For the first question, the first two candidates speaking will each have up to 2 minutes to answer. When they are finished, the other candidates may volunteer to address the issue for up to one minute each although it is not mandatory. They raise their hands, the moderator will call on them, and a volunteer with a "roving" microphone will bring that person a mike. As many roving mikes as possible will be available in order to make the process flow smoothly and quickly. The moderator will make sure that all candidates who choose to participate will have a chance to speak once before anyone is allowed to speak a second time on the topic. The moderator will allow this discussion to continue for 14 minutes or until he/she thinks the topic is exhausted.

This same process will be repeated with the rest of the questions with the candidates giving the two-minute answers rotating in order.

The moderator reserves the right to tailor the amount of time candidates have to speak to accommodate the time remaining in the segment (i.e., he/she might limit answers to 30 seconds as time runs out).

The moderator will make every effort to rotate the order in which the candidates are called so that candidates from one party are not called on twice in a row. The exception to this will be if no one from one of the parties' wishes to speak and several from the other party still do and the moderator does not feel the issue is exhausted. Each minor party candidate will be treated as an individual party.

Any time left over from the 14 minutes allotted for each issue will be used at the end of the forum for asking extra questions. As the forum gets closer to the end, the moderator again may limit the amount of time candidates have to speak in order to tailor it to the time remaining.

The decision as to who will be allowed to speak first to the first question will be decided by putting numbers in a hat. The first two will be numbered 1 and 2 and the rest of the 12 slips of paper will be blank (if there are minor party candidates, an additional number will be added for each-one). Whoever draws the number will answer the first question first and 2 will follow (plus others if there are minor party candidates). If two candidates from the same party both draw, numbered slips, the number 2 plus 5 blank slips will be returned to the hat and the opposing party will draw

again for the number two slot. This process is repeated a second time to decide the two candidates who start the closing statements (again, adjust for minor party candidates).

After the first question is completely finished, question number 2 will start the process over again. The two-minute candidates will be the ones seated next to the previous ones and the moderator will continue to rotate them in order. If a Republican was the first to answer question number one, a Democrat will be the first to answer question number two. Minor party candidates will each be treated as a separate party. The moderator will also attempt to alternate the party of the candidates who volunteer for the one-minute answers.

Four timers will be seated in a prominent place.

- One will time the candidates and let each candidate and the moderator know when 15 seconds remain to speak and when time is up by holding up signs. The candidates should be introduced to their timer and they all should be able to see the signs from where he/she is seated.
- The second timer will time the 14-minute segments and will signal the moderator when two minutes remain and again at 15 seconds and stop. This will be done by holding up signs. The signs should be different colors to prevent confusion.
- The third one times the entire event and lets the moderator know if he/she is getting off schedule. This timer is also the one that alerts the moderator to wrap up in order to allow enough time for candidate closing statements and the wrap-up at the end of the forum.
- The fourth one sits behind the candidate timer and times along as a back-up. It is not unusual for a stopwatch to mess up or for a timer to become bemused by a candidate's statement and forget to time. This back-up timer is the fail-safe person.

The moderator will keep the discussion issue-orientated, orderly, and fair. The moderator's decisions about time, what is appropriate discussion, and when to end discussion, are final.

“Town Meeting” Format

In the “town meeting” format, members of the audience ask the candidates questions in turn. This format requires either a large, self-selected audience or an audience carefully chosen to represent diverse segments of the electorate, especially undecided voters. Candidates should not be able to pack the audience with their supporters.

Usually, there needs to be some control over the questions. Audience questions may be unclear, hostile and bullying, or attempt to draw attention to the questioner. Although asking audience members to submit questions in advance may sacrifice some spontaneity, it allows the sponsor to screen for repetition, clarity and appropriateness and to make sure each candidate gets approximately the same number of questions. Audience members may ask the chosen questions themselves or they may be read by the moderator.

Variations:

- Viewers or listeners in the broadcast audience may phone in questions. The public may be asked to submit questions in advance of the debate.
- Films or tapes of questions posed by persons-in-the-street, school children, senior citizens or other special groups can be used.
- Questions may be submitted by E-mail or over the Internet.

“Round Table Meeting” Format

In the Round Table Meeting format, tables are set up for the audience, and one or two candidates sit at each table and take audience questions for a set period of time. At the end of each time segment, the candidates rotate to the next table. This format is useful for giving large groups a chance to meet each candidate face-to-face and to focus on questions of personal interest.

Other Formats

Other formats, such as Loose Question and Answer/Cross Talk Format or Candidate Cross Questioning, also exist. Printouts are available from the LWVCT office or on the LWVUS “Resource Disk.”

In Conclusion:

A Word about Timing

Ground rules for timing should be agreed upon before the debate. Generally, a candidate should be allowed to finish a sentence, once started. Final decisions as to when a candidate has exceeded his or her limit should be left to the moderator.

Use an unobtrusive method, such as cards or lights, to alert candidates that most or all of their time has been used. Loud bells or buzzers interrupt the candidates' and the audience's concentration and create a game-show atmosphere.