



## FORUM GUIDELINES REGARDING CO-SPONSORING ORGANIZATIONS

Factors to consider when accepting or declining a co-sponsorship with an outside organization

*History:* 1983 LWVC “Forums and Debates” page 15, LWVEF Voter Service handbook “League will participate in events only if the sponsoring groups have **made no endorsement** before the debate. Obtain *in writing* the groups’ agreement that, if they are going to make any endorsement, it won’t be until after the event. Ignoring this rule can cause serious problems later. Candidates and advocates complain that the event is a ‘setup.’ They will refuse to participate or will withdraw at the last minute.”

*Introduction:* In late 2010 the LWVC board decided to take a fresh look at the one paragraph guideline regarding co-sponsoring candidate or issue forums with another organization. We hope this more detailed analysis helps sister Leagues as they organize their forums.

*ISSUE:* Who can we partner with? These guidelines can be used for two types of forums:

- A. Issues forums (where differing or endorsed sides are presented)
- B. Candidates forums (where all or major candidates are presented)

### FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES:

1. LWV is political, *but not partisan*
2. LWV does not endorse candidates
3. LWV (via advocacy arm) does endorse issues and propositions

### KEYS:

1. Protect the public perception of the League
2. Protect LWV reputation, including its non-profit tax status
3. LWV forums should be seen as fair, balanced, and giving equal time to all candidates

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR PARTNERING

### A. Timing of possible candidate endorsements (per 1983 Guidelines)

1. If before the forum the answer is always NO
2. If after the forum? (See problems and benefits, below)

### B. Inclusion of all candidates, or some, based on agreed-upon criteria

(Use general Voter Service materials; all forums should follow "Foundational Principles" and "Keys," above)

1. Talk ahead of time to get common understanding by participants
2. Get it in writing
3. If not all candidates will be invited, it's critical that you have rules set out ahead of time regarding what criteria you are using to determine who gets an invitation
4. If lots of candidates are invited, perhaps you want to utilize creative techniques so the forum is lively and informative, while remaining fair (equal time per candidate) and balanced (rotate who answers first and last)
5. If only one candidate agrees to participate, we cannot hold the forum, so apologize to that candidate and thank him/her for being willing to participate (LWVUS rule against "empty seat" debates).
6. If only one candidate shows up at the forum when two candidates were scheduled, you must cancel the forum. Some Leagues let the attending candidate give a short statement, but no formal question/answer session is permitted.

### **C. Who is asking to partner?**

#### **Evaluation Process:**

1. We can always partner with trusted non-partisan groups
  - a. Examples: PTA, AAUW, Colleges and Universities
2. What about groups that might not be non-partisan (endorse candidates or issues)?
  - a. Media
    - i. Examples: Traditional newspapers, radio, TV vs. new media (web-based; social media)
  - b. Other organizations
    - i. Examples: We haven't worked with them before; ethnic associations; church groups; environmental organizations; local civic organizations
  - c. Other groups that are known to endorse or have a known agenda
    - i. Examples: Chamber of Commerce, Common Cause
  - d. Local action groups
    - i. Examples: Neighborhood organizations; homeowner associations
  - e. Partisan groups/political parties – strongly recommend NO
    - i. Possible example of "yes" – IF multiple differing groups work together with respect

#### **Potential problems to consider:**

1. Be alert to their agenda; they may use the forum to promote their point of view
2. They may encourage uncivil interaction
3. They may try to film and broadcast parts of the forum outside of agreed-upon rules

**Benefits to consider:**

1. Broadening your partnership base
2. Expose people to the League who otherwise may not know about us
3. Show that the League is a good citizen
4. Harvest new members

**How do you find out about this organization?**

1. Community reputation
2. Internet search
3. Interview them and come to common understanding regarding forum procedures

**D. How to avoid conflicts and issues -**

**Start by meeting ahead of time**

1. Meet in person with the person in charge of planning the forum from their organization
2. Agree to ground rules for that forum
3. Put those ground rules in writing
4. Get all planners and candidates to sign those ground rules ahead of time
5. Know who is doing what in the forum; each partner must know what the other partners are doing AND agree to it
6. Examples: Press releases, flyers, promotional materials; workers at the event
6. It is always possible to dissolve a partnership before the event if other partners violate the ground rules. Ask to see any flyers and promotional material before released, especially important to make sure LWV name and logo not used when you dissolve a partnership
7. **LWV maintains control of format of the forum, while attempting to work cooperatively with the partners**

**OTHER LWV FORUM INVOLVEMENT**

**When LWV is NOT the sponsor, but is working in an advisory capacity:**

1. Agreement must be in writing that:
  - a. THAT organization is in charge of making decisions
  - b. LWV logo may not be used
  - c. They may acknowledge our help, verbally

**Moderating another organization's forum:**

1. League moderator attends all meetings to make sure the format is fair and balanced
2. Agreement must be in writing that LWV agrees with the structure of the forum

3. Good format: one that does not allow one candidate more exposure than others, rotates who answers first and last, includes timing that allows as many issues to be addressed as possible

**Stories from the field (How different Leagues have handled different situations):**

- League invited to co-sponsor “Squirm Night” with local neighborhood councils who do not endorse candidates. Members of audience allowed to ask any question to any candidate with no attempt to filter questions or maintain an equal distribution of questions to candidates
  - League response: Not to participate
- League agrees to co-sponsor city council forum with local Chamber of Commerce after they agree not to endorse candidates before the forum. On day of the forum, League discovers that the president of the Chamber is the head of the campaign of one of the candidates with his name and organization title on campaign literature
  - League response: Too late to dissolve partnership, but refused to allow the Chamber president to participate in any way (not even a welcome speech)
- League agrees to co-sponsor a city attorney candidate forum with major town hall organization. Unknown to League, the town hall organization created a flyer with inflammatory language using League’s name and logo on the flyer.
  - League response: Pull out of the partnership and ask that the organization remove League’s name and logo from all publicity of the event
- League partners with city to present issue forum on local ballot measure. Pro/con speakers selected by the city manager. During forum, con speaker decides he is on the pro side of the issue resulting in a presentation that is unbalanced and unfair
  - League response: Nothing could be done- forum was being televised live.
  - Lesson learned: League should select or at least interview the speakers chosen to present both sides of the issue
- League agrees to co-sponsor city council forum with a neighborhood association who agrees not endorse candidates. League then discovers that the association is funded solely by the city police union that has endorsed two candidates.
  - League response: go ahead with the partnership but insist that the League set all the rules and format decisions