



## DESIGNING A FORMAT FOR MULTI-CANDIDATE FORUMS

With Proposition 14 passing in June 2010, future primary election candidate forums promise to be more complicated. Now, in primary elections for congressional, state legislative and statewide offices, **all** candidates regardless of political party and all independent candidates are listed on every voter's ballot. Leagues will no longer be able to organize candidate forums for just one political party but will now have to invite all candidates to participate together since party registration no longer determines the candidates on a ballot. The challenge will be to find a format that allows numerous candidates to present their views in a fair and objective manner that is both educational and interesting. In the November general election, only the top two vote-getters are on the ballot, making candidate forums infinitely simpler.

While many local Leagues concentrate on local elections and only occasionally produce State Senate and Assembly forums, there is still a great interest in how to choose a format that is fair and impartial when there are lots of candidates on the platform.

**There is no such thing as a "League" format** (although I have heard that term used many times). Some Leagues are under the impression that state and national League policies require every candidate to answer every question in a timed response and that is the only "League-like" format. Of course, when you have six candidates or less, this traditional format is the easiest and safest to implement.

Nor is there a perfect format; any format you choose will have advantages and disadvantages. You might want to plan a forum with several segments using different formats. What is important to remember is that whatever information the audience receives during the forum is more information than they would have if the League did not allow the candidates to discuss the issues in an unrehearsed setting. The whole mission of the League is predicated on the belief that giving voters unbiased, nonpartisan information about candidates helps voters make informed leadership choices.

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## FACTORS TO CONSIDER

Before discussing specific formats which might be used when there are many candidates invited, some of the factors to consider when choosing a format are:

1. The **number of candidates** for that office.

Obviously the number of candidates affects timing, questions, logistics, just about everything. Experience has taught me that the traditional LWV format of having every candidate answer every question does not work if there are more than **six** candidates participating. Listening to more than four answers to the same question usually results in many identical answers and is deadly boring. The audience will quickly lose interest.

2. The **quality of the candidates**.

The more professional the candidates, the more creative you can be in designing a format. Candidates who can think on their feet and speak clearly will do well in any format. You may not always know the candidates in advance, but there are times your instinct tells you that a simple, controlled format would be best. If it is a “hot” contest with controversial issues, negative ads and name-calling, I would advise you to be cautious in choosing a format that maintains maximum control.

3. The **issues in the contest**.

Sometimes there are one or two overriding issues in the race – such as a specific project, transportation route, or a report of unethical behavior by the incumbent, etc. If that is the case, you should design the format so that a comprehensive, detailed discussion of that issue is possible or else the audience/candidates will ignore other questions and keep returning to this issue.

4. Is there an **incumbent running or is it an open seat?**

This will determine the tenor of the forum and the questions asked. If the incumbent refuses to participate (as often happens), you should know in advance what the Leagues’ position will be about holding the forum anyway.

Without the incumbent present to answer the attacks on his actions, the forum can easily generate into an anti-incumbent event. Without the office holder present to respond to attacks on his record, there is no way to stop misleading and inaccurate information being presented. But if the incumbent refuses to participate, it is perfectly legitimate to go on with the forum provided all candidates were given the same invitation and opportunity to respond and that there is more than one other candidate participating. Never allow a “substitute” to speak for a candidate or to answer questions. In addition, an “empty seat” on the stage for a non-participating candidate is not permissible if that candidate informed the League that he/she will not attend. The only time an empty seat with name plate is OK is when the candidate has agreed to participate and is a “no show”.

5. The **audience** expected to attend.

LWV often co-sponsors forums with organizations interested in specific information such as parent-teacher associations, homeowner groups, etc. In this case, it is best to design the format allowing information about specific issues to be discussed; you don’t want a frustrated, angry audience. Allow several questions on an issue if it is the main interest of the group.

Certain communities have reputations for being “troublemakers” who come to disrupt the forum and embarrass candidates. If this is the case, do not allow oral questions from the floor and select a strong moderator to control an unruly audience. Written questions reviewed in advance (even questions prepared in advance) are better when a large, unpredictable audience is expected.

On the other hand, if you know your audience will be small, polite and abide by the rules, allowing the audience to ask questions from the floor is often the most satisfying format because the audience “buys in” to the proceedings and you get maximum audience participation.

6. The **facility and logistics**.

Ability to arrange microphones for all candidates (two candidates can share one mic) is a factor to consider as well as a microphone for the audience if questions are allowed from the floor. It is disruptive and time-consuming to have candidates leave their seats and walk to a podium to answer a question.

If the forum is being taped or televised, camera and light positioning is important and the camera crew should help set up the stage. Large-print

candidate name plates help the cameraman and audience follow the proceedings.

## SPECIFIC FORMAT COMPONENTS

### 1. *Who Answers Which Questions?*

#### A. **All** candidates answer **every** question

Advantages: fairest and least controversial; gives audience opportunity to compare candidates on specific issues

Disadvantages: impossible to use with large number of candidates; boring and repetitive

#### B. Each candidate answers a **different** question

Advantages: interesting and entertaining; if questions are good and the drawing is random, format is fair and equitable to all candidates

Disadvantages: no comparison of candidates on issues possible; no in-depth discussion of issues; no interchange between candidates

#### C. A **group of candidates** answers one question

Advantages: allows some comparison of candidates; allows some discussion of issues; fewer questions needed –emphasize important issues

Disadvantages: can be confusing to candidates and audience; needs good moderator; in order to be fair, same group of candidates should not answer questions together every round and who answers first should change.

### 2. *Where Should Questions Come From?*

#### A. Questions from Audience

##### 1. Oral

- Requires moderator to repeat questions so all can hear
- Needs strong moderator to stop speeches from audience

- No control of questions (moderator can still reject question if inappropriate)
- Requires microphone for audience use
- Candidates should not be allowed to pack the audience with their supporters

## 2. Written

- Review committee can screen for repetition, clarity and appropriateness
- Control personal questions and attacks on candidate
- Review committee can set priorities as to issues covered by selecting order of questions to be asked
- Select members of review committee who are knowledgeable about the issues in the contest

## B. Questions Prepared in Advance

### 1. Professional Panels

- Journalists, radio and TV reporters, college professors, and others
- Choose a diverse panel, representing different media and viewpoints
- Must be nonpartisan- panelists cannot have endorsed a candidate
- Recruit experts in the level of government being discussed- i.e. state, local, school board

### 2. Panel of Questioners from Co-sponsoring Organizations

- Each organization can be given specific amount of time to ask questions on a subject in which they are interested
- Each organization given a number of questions to solicit from their members

- Each organization selects its own spokesperson to ask questions
3. Questions/Topics Given to Candidates in Advance
    - Allows candidates to prepare answers in advance; better answers (?)
    - Lacks spontaneity; hard to evaluate candidates' ability to think on their feet
    - Can be used for a portion of the forum, allowing questions from audience or panelists in another time segment
  4. Moderator Asks All Questions (A Tom Brokaw or Ted Koppel etc.)
    - Recent presidential candidate forums have used a simple television personality as moderator/questioner “informally” asking questions in a free flow discussion type format. The answers are not timed and who answers is left to the discretion of the moderator.

### 3. *How Long Should Candidates Have to Answer Questions?*

Depends on:

- Number of candidates participating
- Length of forum
- Number of issues you wish to cover in forum
- Are the candidates knowledgeable? If you give them more time, will they give more detailed answers?

**SHORT answers always work out best.** Short answers force a candidate to be concise and to the point. A candidate will take as much time you give him/her regardless of whether they have anything more to say or not because they do not want their opponents to have the spotlight longer than they do. If a candidate has nothing much to say in a minute, giving him two or three minutes does not make the answer better!

### 4. *Should there be Follow-Up Questions?*

Follow-up questions can be used regardless of how the questions are generated: oral or written audience questions, panelist questions, organization questions etc.

They are usually shorter, more specific questions that come to mind after the candidate answers the initial question. The time-limit for follow-up answers is usually shorter too.

Advantages:

- Allows more in-depth discussion of issues, i.e. “Where will the money come for that project?”
- Allows the moderator to probe for more in-depth answers and to point out when the candidate is evasive or did not answer the question
- Forum is more lively and interesting

Disadvantages:

- Takes up time; fewer issues can be covered
- Requires knowledgeable questioners who can think of good follow-up questions quickly
- Can be unfair if some candidates are given follow-up questions and others are not

#### 5. *Should Candidates be Given The Opportunity to Question Each Other?*

Advantages:

- Enlivens the forum
- Candidates usually ask more personal questions – i.e. campaign issues and contributions
- Can tell a lot about a candidate by the questions he asks his opponent(s)

Disadvantages:

- Can result in unprofessional questions
- Cannot be used if there are multi-candidates; best in 2 candidate debate
- Candidates must be given advance notice if this format is to be used.

#### 6. *Should You Allow The Audience to Address Questions (Oral or Written) to a Specific Candidate?*

Advantages:

- Promotes more personal questions, i.e. Why did you vote for \_\_\_?
- Audience likes to be able to direct questions to specific candidates
- Questions usually go to the best known candidates, hence more interesting

Disadvantages:

- Extremely hard for moderator to insure candidates are given equal time
- Usually the incumbent gets most of the questions
- Harder to keep the questions about public policy and not accusations or attacks
- Candidates will “stack” questions in the audience to embarrass other candidates or make sure an issue is addressed

My experience: It is best not to allow questions addressed to specific candidates. Almost all questions of a personal nature can be rewritten so as to allow all candidates to respond to that same question. (Review committee can rewrite question so it can be answered by all).

7. *Should Opening and Closing Statements Be Used?*

A. *Opening Statements*

Advantages:

- Allows candidates to introduce themselves and tell why they are seeking office
- Give the audience a chance to know who the candidates are before they start answering questions
- Moderator does not have to introduce candidates- can be subjective

Disadvantages

- Time-consuming; question-answer period is a better use of time
- Boring; candidates positions are usually given in answers to questions

- Often unnecessary; candidates are well known to audience

Note: instead of opening statements, some Leagues prepare a printed program with short biographies of the candidates so they can eliminate opening statements and allow more time for questions.

**If used, opening statements should be *short*.**

#### B. Closing Statements

Advantages:

- Good way to end event – summation
- Allows candidates to correct any misunderstanding or inaccuracy
- Allows candidate to prioritize his/her positions for the audience – what is the most important reason you should vote for them?

Disadvantages:

- Can be repetitive and boring – often heard same speech throughout forum
- Waste a valuable time for questions

**If used, closing statements should be *short*.**

### 8. *Should You Use Set Timing or Flexible Timing?*

#### A. Set Timing

Advantages:

- Only way to ensure equal exposure and equal opportunity for candidates to express their positions
- Candidates are used to having answers timed and usually abide by time limits willingly
- Safest method of maintaining control of the forum

Disadvantages:

- Formal and stiff- not as interesting as a freestyle discussion of issues
- Does not allow for a real interchange of ideas

- Ignores the fact that some questions are more complicated and deserve more time

## B. Flexible Timing

Advantages:

- More interesting to the audience
- Good panelists or moderators can get to the heart of an issue by asking several questions after an initial response, either to the same candidate or to other candidates
- Especially effective on television. Requires strong moderator to keep the discussion on track and will work only if candidates agree in advance to accept the moderator's authority.

Disadvantages:

- Harder to orchestrate- must have a strong moderator or panelists
- Harder to guarantee fairness, objectivity of the forum
- Nontraditional type of format; needs to be endorsed by participants

## FORMATS THAT WORK WITH A LARGE NUMBER OF CANDIDATES

### 1. Pre-designed Grid (include example)

Design a grid with groups of candidates answering a question and then another group answering the next question etc. Usually three candidates form a group, but a different number can be used if that works out better. Different candidates are placed together each time. Candidate answering first and last changes each round.

<i>Example of Grid for 10 Candidates- three answers to a question:</i>							
CANDIDATES	Joe	Sue	Chuck	Bob	Mary	Linda	Greg
<b>QUESTIONS</b>							
#1	X			X			
#2		X				X	
#3			X				X
#4				X	X		
#5		X				X	
#6	X						X
#7			X		X		
#8		X				X	
#9	X			X			X

2. Comment Card Format (created by LWV Oakland)

After a round of opening statements and a one-minute question addressed to all candidates, the moderator will ask questions directly to individual candidates. All candidates are given a limited, by equal number of colored 'comment cards'. These 'comment cards' are 45 second opportunities to comment on each other's direct questions. They will be represented by numbered cards given to each candidate and their use will be recorded on a chart visible to the audience. Any unused card time will be added to the time allotted for a candidate's closing statement.

3. Lightning Round Questions

Candidates are given 15 or 30 seconds to answer a direct question. They are asked to give a largely yes-no answer in order to give voters a sense of the candidates' convictions or insight into core ethical or moral beliefs that drive their policies. Example: do you support or oppose a specific law or policy. Lightning round questions can be used for a segment of format along with other more traditional formats

4. Candidate Selected Questions

Put the candidates in pods (groups of 6 or 8): rearrange the candidates in pods after each round so that no candidate gets to go first every time. First two candidates answer a question, then the next two answer another question, then the next two candidates get to select one of the two questions that went to the first four candidates ( numbers may be adjusted for more candidates) Make sure that the candidates selecting their own questions change every round.

5. Rapid Fire Questions

In the last 15- 20 minutes of a forum when there are still lots of questions unanswered, candidates are each given a different question and allowed a limited time to answer (30, 45, or 60 seconds). After all candidates have answered one question, they are then asked to answer one of the questions they wish they had been asked.

6. Cumulative Time Format (Time in the Bank): originated by LWV Connecticut

Candidates have a specified amount of time to speak during the entire forum. Timekeepers keep track of how much cumulative time each candidate has used; best to have a separate timekeeper for each candidate. Periodically, all the

timekeepers simultaneously hold up signs indicating the amount of time used by each candidate. The moderator, candidates and audience can see how the candidate's time usage compares. The moderator will direct the next question to the candidate with the lowest time-usage and will ask the candidates to self-moderate to balance any significant time usage discrepancies. This format encourages a candidate 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 question each other, understanding that the "clock is running" and they are using up their allotted time. The moderator reminds the candidates of the clock and moves to another question when the topic appears exhausted. Candidates are not allowed to "save up" time and use it to make a speech at the end. A closing statement is often included with order determined by lot prior to the debate.

Note: my experience using this format is positive but I do not recommend it when there are more than four candidates)

Rigid, format formats of the past are changing. "Future debates at every level will undoubtedly feature more innovation and less formality. Candidates and voters now are more willing to accept new ways of conducting forums and evolving technology will make more creative and ingenious formats possible." (Face to Face: A Guide to Candidate Debates", LWVUS)