

Speed Dating With the Candidates Toolbox

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Overview

Description

Speed dating for politics! A 1- to 2-hour discussion forum for voters and candidates in which small groups of voters gather for a brief roundtable discussion with individual candidates, one at a time. The candidates rotate from table to table at intervals of 10 minutes.

The roundtable candidate forum is useful when there are multiple, contested races or many candidates for one race. If an expected candidate does not show up for the forum, the other candidate(s) for that contested race may participate because the candidates are not answering the same questions at the same time. Unopposed candidates may also participate.

Goal and Objectives

Goal

Encourage informed and active participation in government by facilitating voter engagement.

Objectives

1. Engage voters and their candidates for office through participation in roundtable discussions.
2. Increase voter knowledge of major campaign issues through a brief overview and facilitating candidate questions.

Activity Segments

1. Introduction (20 minutes)
2. Roundtable discussions (11 minutes X number of candidates)
3. Conclusion (30 minutes)
4. Meet & Greet (30 minutes)



Introduction

Description

A 15-minute presentation in which the local League president (or designee) welcomes attendees, states the objectives of the forum, explains the League nonpartisan policy, and introduces the voters service chair (or a nonpartisan guest) (5 minutes). Optional: Four to five major issues of the campaign are outlined with questions to be considered (8 minutes). One facilitator explains the speed-dating roundtable discussion process (2 minutes).

Opening statements. Before starting the roundtable discussions, individual candidates introduce themselves and state why they are running for office in a 1-minute timed segment. Candidates then go to their first assigned table with the assistance of volunteers.

Concepts

- Welcome
- Nonpartisanship
- Political issues appropriate for candidates
- Speed dating for politics

Number LWV Volunteers

- Local League president or other League leader (introduction)
- Local League voters service chair or a nonpartisan guest (outlines issues)
- One facilitator (describes the process)
- One timekeeper (times opening statements)

Supplies & Equipment

Printed Materials

- Sign-in sheets (one for attendees and one for candidates)
- Nametags
 - Preprinted nametags for each candidate and volunteer
 - Blank nametags for attendees
- Programs (schedule of activities, qualifications for each office represented and names of corresponding candidates, ground rules for discussion, and space for notes)
- Be a Texas Voter bookmarks (deadlines, dates, websites, voter ID information; individualized for each local League at <https://my.lwv.org/texas/vote-it-counts>)
- Membership applications
- Note pads and pens for candidates

Supplies

- Pens for sign-in sheets
- Markers for nametags
- LWV banner for podium
- Bottled water for candidates
- Light refreshments
- Paper plates, cups, and napkins

Equipment

- 4' X 6' registration table with 2-3 chairs
- 4' X 6' display table where candidates can place campaign materials
- 4' X 6' head table(s) for candidates to await beginning the forum
- Round tables with chairs (spaced as far apart as possible)
 - One table per candidate (with its number prominently displayed in the center)
 - 6-10 chairs per table (one chair marked "Reserved for Candidate" and a balloon)
- Podium for the leaders participating in the introduction
- Microphone at the podium (if needed for size of the room)

Script for Introduction

Welcome

Welcome! I'm _____, _____ of the League of Women Voters of _____ . The League is very glad that you are here. We hope that your participation in the roundtable discussions will achieve two objectives:

- Increase voter-candidate engagement in our community and
- Increase voter knowledge of candidate positions on the major issues facing voters in this election

Give and take between voters and candidates over the issues is exactly what our founders had in mind ___ years ago when the League was formed in 1920. We commend these candidates for running for office, for participating today, and being willing to tell us how they will improve our community through their public service.

As a reminder, the League is a **nonpartisan** political organization. We are nonpartisan in that we do not support or oppose candidates for office or political parties. We are **political** in that we advocate on issues after study and agreement among the members. Most important, we are dedicated to expanding public awareness about governmental issues.

The League of Women Voters is not for women only. We welcome your participation and support, whether male or female. And in fact, we have membership forms available should you wish to join us. And if you would like to support our nonpartisan education activities, we would welcome your tax-deductible donation to our Education Fund.

Now, please turn off your cell phones. No recording of this event is permitted except by our photographer/videographer. Restrooms are located... And now, I turn the meeting over to _____, our _____ who will provide an outline of the major issues at stake in this election.

The Issues

We vote mainly because the officials we elect as voters make significant decisions that affect our lives—taxes, roads, minimum wage, teacher pay, social security, health care—you name it. And voters, you are here because you want to know more about the candidates' positions on issues pertinent to their office. Major issues facing candidates in this election include _____, _____, _____, and _____. Let's look at them one at a time.

– See example format on next page for brief description of each issue –

Now that you have an overview of these issues, _____, one of our facilitators, will explain to you how you will be able to discuss them with each of the candidates.

The Process

As you can see, a candidate is seated at each table with a group of voters and one facilitator. The facilitator will begin the discussion by asking one pertinent question. Following the candidate's response, those seated with the candidate will have the opportunity to ask questions. Each roundtable discussion will last 10 minutes, after which a bell will notify the candidates to move on to the table with the next higher number. Before we start, let me review the ground rules for our discussions.¹

1. Let everyone have an opportunity to speak.
2. Don't interrupt unless for clarification or time keeping.
3. Listen carefully and respectfully; speak carefully and respectfully.
 - a. Be agreeable even when you disagree.
 - b. Accept that no viewpoint has a complete monopoly on the truth.
4. Share your personal experience when giving an example, not someone else's.
5. Avoid personal attacks, inflammatory rhetoric, gossip, and assigning motives to another person.
6. Remember that roundtable discussions are a dialogue, not a debate. Avoid being the know-it-all, convincer, or corrector.

Opening statements. Before we begin the discussions, our candidates will introduce themselves and why they are running for office in 1 minute. Will the candidates and timekeeper please come forward.... Candidates will speak in alphabetical order beginning with....

Now let's begin speed dating for politics!

Example Format for Brief Summary of an Issue

Trans-Pecos Pipeline. The Trans-Pecos Pipeline is a 148 mile, 42" pipeline designed to carry natural gas from a hub outside Fort Stockton through Central West Texas ending at the Texas-Mexico border near Presidio. Texas-based Energy Transfer Partners is responsible for constructing and operating the pipeline.

Advocates for the pipeline argue that it will

- benefit air quality in the region by replacing Northern Mexico's polluting coal, diesel, and wood-burning fuel with clean-burning natural gas,
- create 350 construction and labor jobs,
- bring additional revenue to local communities from use of goods and services, and
- pay \$7.1 million in annual taxes to the three counties crossed by the pipeline

Opponents of the pipeline argue that it will

- damage the pristine nature of the Big Bend area, characterized by wide-open spaces and beautiful landscapes,
- run close to Big Ben National Park and the Chinati State Natural Area, harming their precious and diverse species of wildlife and flowers, and
- use eminent domain to seize private land if a satisfactory agreement isn't reached with an individual landowner.

The question at issue is "How would you balance the environmental concerns of Big Bend residents related to construction of the Trans-Pecos natural gas pipeline with oil and gas industry interests?"

¹ Adapted from *Faithful Citizenship: Ground Rules for Civil Dialogue*, by Archdiocese of Portland Oregon Office of Life, Justice and Peace, 2016. Available at https://pdxlifejusticepeace.org/documents/2016/3/LJP_Civil_Dialogue.pdf

Roundtable Discussion

Description

A 10-minute dialogue between one candidate and a small group of voters seated at a round table with a facilitator. At the end of each 10-minute segment, the candidate rotates to the next highest numbered table. The role of the facilitator:

- Set comfortable, welcoming tone.
 - Moderate the discussion without making content contributions.
 - Avoid sharing personal opinions or pushing own agenda.
 - Assist group in adhering to the ground rules.
- Process
 - Thank the candidate for participating.
 - Begin the discussion with one predetermined, nonpartisan question to the candidate. Rotate questions for each segment.
 - Transition to voter questions; field questions fairly.
 - Monitor the time; end promptly after 10-minutes.

Concepts

- Civic engagement among voters and candidates
- A secure, safe place for democracy in action

Number LWV Volunteers

- One facilitator/moderator per table
- One timekeeper
- Photographer or videographer (seated at one table where participants signed release form)

Supplies & Equipment

- Release forms for attendees at one table where photographer or videographer is seated
- Predetermined nonpartisan questions for facilitators to begin each segment of the roundtable discussion
- Mini pencils (3.5" presharpener; one per chair at each round table)
- Stop watch and timing signs

Suggestions for Managing Downtime, Tension, & Polarization

1. Managing downtime

Q: What do I do when the discussion is at a standstill?

A: Go around the table for a comment from each participant, but allow participants to pass. Say something like, "We'd like to hear one comment or question from each person who wants to speak." (Adapted from Sheffert, p. 7)

2. Managing tension

Q: "What do I do when a participant says something that visibly heightens tension?" (p. 7)

A: Try the "Anyone Else?" approach. For example:

Participant: "I'm frustrated that all we've done is listen instead of asking questions!"

Facilitator: "Anyone else feeling frustrated?"

Rules for Asking, "Anyone Else?"

1. Listen for the intensity of feeling, and note what happens in the group. If anxiety rises, if you sense more tension in yourself, that could be a moment to ask an "Anyone else?" question. (Many statements require no response. The person making them is satisfied to get it out, and people accept the comment as part of the dialogue.)
2. Cite only the feeling behind the statement if the issue is potentially divisive. Find a subgroup for the emotion so that all emotions remain legitimate. (From Sheffert, p. 7)

3. Managing polarization

Q: "What do I do if people appear to become deeply polarized over conflicting beliefs, problem definitions, solutions, or decisions?" (Sheffert, p. 8)

A: Instead of trying to get participants back to the topic, find a way for them to listen and talk about the issue.

Rules for "Listen & Talk"

1. Stop the action.
2. Ask people to identify which subgroup they belong to.
3. Encourage the A's to talk with each other while the B's listen.
4. After all the A's have had their say, ask the B's to do the same while subgroup A listens.
5. Go back to action. Generally, people develop a more grounded sense of what they consider relevant. Also, they experience a continuum of opinions rather than two opposite poles. (From Sheffert, p. 8)

Source

Adapted from *The Power of Civil Discourse: Creating Positive Programs and Forums in an Increasingly Uncivil World*, by D. R. Scheffert, May 2011, presented at 63rd Annual LWV Minnesota Convention. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/yckslcv3>

Conclusion

Description

Closing statements by the candidates (2-3 minutes each) followed by a 1-minute wrap-up by the League president or other League leader.

Script for Conclusion

Closing statements. At this time will all the candidates come forward to the head table. Each candidate will have 2 [or 3] minutes to make a closing statement which sums up his discussions and take-away points. Candidates will speak in reverse alphabetical order beginning with....

Wrap-up. As we have listened and learned together, we have become informed voters. We thank these candidates for the time, effort, and sacrifice that it has taken to bring each to this point in their candidacies. Let's show our appreciation with a big round of applause!

The bookmark you received when you came in has websites for more information about voting. You'll find various deadlines, when you can vote, where to find voters guides, and an up-to-date list of documents that can be used if you don't have an acceptable photo ID. So please take a look.

Your vote counts—the only time your vote doesn't count is when you don't vote.

Thank you for coming and helping us Make Democracy Work!

Planning the Event

Before the Event

Begin detailed planning activities for the event at least 4-6 weeks prior to the date of the event.

- Assign responsibilities and deadlines to members of the event planning committee.
- Secure a location with needed tables, chairs, and equipment (see next page).
- Contact candidates.
 - Explain that the new format allows direct interaction with the voters and that a Meet and Greet will be held following the forum.
 - Send and secure participation agreement (see sample).
- Publicize event.
- Recruit volunteers.
- Review Open Meetings Act policy in the LWV-TEF *A Guide to Candidate Forums for Local Leagues* and act accordingly.
- Print materials, obtain supplies and other equipment (see next page).

Day of the Event

- Train facilitators
 - See "Roundtable Discussion" and "Suggestions for Managing Downtown, Tension, & Polarization."
 - Provide list of predetermined, nonpartisan questions to begin each segment of the roundtable discussion.
- Arrange the room (place round tables as far apart as possible).
- Prepare registration table.
- Place/distribute signs, banner, candidate name tents and water bottles, table numbers, and refreshments

Following the Event

Direct Outreach

- Thank candidates and volunteers
- Follow-up names on sign-in sheet
- Evaluate what went well and what needs improvement; make notes for future events
- Restock membership materials

Allied Outreach

- Follow-up with the allied organization to strengthen mutual relationship
- Evaluate working with this organization for future events
- Invite key members to join LWV

Media Outreach

- Send out follow-up press release or letter to the editor
- Thank members of the media that attended
- Invite media to next event

Tips

- Start and end the event on time.
- End each round on time, and quickly start the next round so participants do not lose interest.
 - Ring a loud bell (voice announcements are not heard).
 - An iPad timer can be posted at the front of the room so everyone knows how much time is left in each round.
- As attendees enter, ask them to sit at the round tables as evenly distributed as possible.
- Ask media personnel to sit at different tables or move around the tables.
- Schedule a break midway if the forum will last longer than 1 hour.
- After the forum, provide time and space for candidates and attendees to visit.
- Option: Assign a different topic to each table (label table with topic). Attendees self-select their topic tables.

Comprehensive List of Volunteers, Supplies, & Equipment

Item	Registration Table	Introduction	Roundtable Discussion
Volunteers			
Host (president or designee)		1	
Voters service chair or guest		1	
Discussion facilitator		1	1 for each table
Registration volunteer staff	2-3		
Timekeeper			1
Photographer/videographer		1	
Materials to be Printed			
Bookmarks with election info. etc.	1 per attendee		
Programs	1 per attendee		
Nametags–preprinted (number the candidate nametags)	1 per candidate & volunteer		
Nametags–blank	1 per attendee		
Name tents–preprinted		1 per candidate	
Sign-in sheets for attendees	5		
Sign-in sheet for candidates	1		
Membership applications	20		
Predetermined candidate questions for facilitators			1 set per facilitator
Signs: Restrooms, No Campaign Tee Shirts, Campaign Literature; table numbers			
Supplies			
Markers for nametags	5		
Pens for sign-in sheets	5		
Mini pencils (3.5" presharp)			1 box
LWV banner	1	1	
Bottled water for candidates	1 per candidate		
Light refreshments	Attendees		
Paper plates, cups, & napkins	Attendees		
Equipment			
4' X 6' table	3-4		
Round tables with chairs	1 table per candidate with 6-10 chairs each		
Podium		1	
Microphone at podium		1	
Stop watch and timing signs			1 set

Credits

Meltzer, Iris, League of Women Voters of Kent, OH. (2016, June). *Alternative to candidate forums–Consider a speed dating format!* Presented at the LWVUS 52nd National Convention, Washington, DC.

Scott-Johnson, Marguerite, League of Women Voters of the Hill Country, TX. (2016, June). Notes. *Alternative to candidate forums–Consider a speed dating format!* Presented at the LWVUS 52nd National Convention, Washington, DC.

Sample Participation Rules & Agreement

[Use LWV logo and/or local League letterhead]
[Contact information for event coordinator]

[Name of event]	
[Date & time of event]	
[Location of event]	
Agenda	
Introduction, opening statements	10:00 – 10:20
Roundtable discussions	10:20 – 12:00
Candidate closing remarks, adjourn	12:00 – 12:30
Meet & greet	12:30 – 01:00

RSVP

Please reply to this invitation by [*date & time*] so that the event can be publicized. Information will list candidates invited and whether they will be attending, not attending, or no response received.

- If you plan to attend, complete the Participation Agreement at the end of this document.
 - Email it to [*name, email address*].
 - Or mail it to [*name, mailing address*].
- If you do not plan to attend, please email your reply to [*name @ email address*].

The Candidates Invited to Participate

- All candidates, including unopposed candidates, who appear on the ballot for the following races are invited: [*list the offices*].
- Candidates in contested races may participate even if their opponents fail to appear because they are not answering the same questions at the same time.
- Only candidates will be allowed to participate. No substitute for a candidate may participate in the roundtable discussion, read a statement, or distribute candidate literature.

Description of Candidate Roundtable Discussion Forum

Opening statement. Prior to the roundtable discussions, individual candidates introduce themselves and state why they are running for office in a 1-minute timed segment. Candidates then go to their first assigned table with the assistance of volunteers.

Discussion. A series of 10-minute dialogues between one candidate and a small group of voters seated at a round table with a nonpartisan facilitator. At the end of each 10-minute segment, the candidate rotates to the next highest numbered table. Questions will be asked by citizens at each table. Candidate answers to each of the questions should be limited to 1 minute to accommodate as many questions as possible. Candidates should focus only on their own positions and opinions and refrain from referring to their opponents. Citizens will be asked to maintain civil discourse.

Closing statement. Following the roundtable discussions, individual candidates make closing statements in a timed 2-minute segment. The closing statement should correspond to the major issues raised in the roundtable discussions. Please refrain from referring to other candidates.

Participation Rules

1. Candidates should arrive at least 10 minutes prior to the beginning of the event.
2. Candidate literature should be placed on the designated table. It may not be placed on seats or handed to attendees as they enter or leave the room. Only small items are permitted (e.g., cards, brochures, flyers), not yard signs or banners. No campaign signs, banners, literature, handouts, or other campaign paraphernalia is allowed in the parking lot.

3. Candidates may not use notes or other props in their statements or roundtable discussions. (A notepad and pen will be provided to each candidate for note taking, along with a nametag and bottle of water.)
4. Each candidate will have 1 minute for an opening statement and up to 2 minutes for a closing statement.
5. All questions will come from attendees during the roundtable discussions. Candidates may not address questions to other candidates.
6. Candidates shall refrain from making statements about other candidates' positions or personal attacks/accusations. Negative campaigning is forbidden.
7. The audience will be asked to refrain from applause or other demonstrations of support or opposition for a candidate.
8. All candidates are invited to participate in a Meet & Greet following the forum to visit informally with attendees.
9. All news releases about this event will be distributed by the League of Women Voters and sent to all candidates.
10. Audio-video recording and photography of the roundtable discussion event is limited to and becomes the property of the League of Women Voters. Members of the news media may take notes for news stories about the event

Participation Agreement

I agree to participate in the candidate roundtable discussion forum to be held [*date*] and accept the format and rules as presented above. The forum content is the property of the League of Women Voters and permission must be sought to rebroadcast the event in its entirety or to print excerpts. I agree that I will not use any portion of the forum in a political advertisement.

Name (printed)

Signature

Date