



**The League of Women Voters
of the North Country**
Celebrating Democracy in America

Blueprint for Candidate Debates and Forums

The Purpose of League-Sponsored Debates and Forums

The League of Women Voters is a unique, multi-issue, non-partisan, political organization which does not support or oppose candidates for public office. It encourages informed and active participation in government and influences public policy through advocacy and education. We seek to educate the public about the issues in the campaigns: to provide an opportunity for voters to hear candidates discuss those issues face-to-face, to stimulate public interest and participation in the elections, and to provide an opportunity for the public to engage their candidates. The League believes these purposes are best served by adoption of nonpartisan, objective, and understandable written criteria for candidate inclusion.

Guidelines for Candidate Participation

Constitutional eligibility: The candidate must meet the requirements of the NYS Constitution and the Constitution of the United States. All candidates for office who meet NYS election law requirements to be on the ballot and are involved in contested races are eligible to take part in candidate forums.

Empty Chair Debates

According to the Federal Election Commission (FEC), if a candidate is running for federal office, a debate cannot be held unless there are at least two candidates “face to face” (there cannot be a substitute for a candidate); therefore, with only one candidate there is no option but to cancel. The FEC regulations state that this holds even if a candidate simply does not show up at the last minute. If the League were to proceed with only one candidate for a national office, our nonpartisan status would be jeopardized.

State and Local Debates: The FEC rules do not apply unless you are planning to hold your debate at a television studio. Television comes under Federal Communications Commission (FCC) guidelines and the television station will determine if the debate can proceed with only one candidate.

In the case of a debate when there are three or more candidates (for example, in a Town Councilperson contest), and one is unable to participate, then a League member can read a three to five-minute statement submitted by the absent candidate. No substitutes will be permitted to take the place of the candidate.

In the case of a debate involving only two candidates, both of whom have agreed to participate, if one does not appear at the last minute, the remaining candidate can make a three- to-five minute statement, but there will be no opportunity for questions. The moderator will read the statement provided by the absent candidate. In the case of a proposed debate involving only two candidates when one declines to participate, that particular debate will be canceled.

In the Case of an Election When the Candidate is Unopposed

If an unopposed candidate were to appear at an LWV candidate forum, it could be interpreted as a contribution to that candidate and jeopardize the League's 501(c) (3) status and nonpartisanship reputation.

FCC regulations also preclude broadcast coverage of only one candidate. Instead, unopposed candidates might be invited to meet and greet attendees at the end of another candidate debate or contribute a statement to the League of Women Voters of the North Country vote411.org site.

Cellphone and Forum Footage, Candidate Literature—All cell phones should be turned off as a matter of courtesy; no videotaping of candidate debates, or parts thereof, is permitted except by those expressly authorized by the League of Women Voters of the North Country. Candidates' literature will be allowed to be distributed on tables placed near the entrance to the forum location.

Debate Co-Sponsorship Guidelines

Any organization co-sponsoring a debate with the League of Women Voters of the North Country must meet the following conditions:

- refrain from endorsing candidates prior to or immediately after the debate
- follow the League's guidelines for candidate participation
- agree to accept the League's standards of nonpartisanship and debate quality
- treat the candidates equitably
- agree to jointly issue all press releases, letters and other material circulated to the public

Possible Formats for Candidate Debates

1. League Member Serves As Moderator

Moderator manages the debate and asks the questions. Opening statements are made by all candidates with the order of speaking determined by lots. Closing statements are made in reverse order from opening statements. Questions will be written on cards distributed when audience members enter the debate area. Written questions can be given directly to League members who will screen the questions to avoid embarrassing, non-answerable or duplicative questions.

This procedure allows all who wish to ask questions to do so without risking disruption. It has the added advantage of the moderator having questions in hand to repeat accurately, if necessary. There is a timekeeper.

2. Media Panel (Newspaper, Radio, TV Reporters, League Members) Asks The Questions

League member may serve as moderator. Opening statements are made by all candidates with the speaking order determined by lots; closing statements are made in reverse order from opening statements. Questions will be written on cards distributed when audience members enter the debate area. Questions are vetted by League members and possibly by others agreed upon by the candidates. The source of the questions can be the League, the media and the audience, and should be identified as such. All candidates have the opportunity to answer all questions and there may be a timekeeper.

Policy Adopted by the Board of Directors _____ (Date)

