

Date Printed: 06/16/2009

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JTS Box Number: IFES\_78  
Tab Number: 128  
Document Title: Face to Face: A Guide to Candidate Debates  
Document Date: 1996  
Document Country: United States -- General  
Document Language: English  
IFES ID: CE02870



\* F C D 2 0 A 0 2 - 2 0 D A - 4 8 3 E - 8 F A 7 - 9 3 F 2 B 7 E 7 C 4 3 B \*



# FACE TO FACE

A GUIDE TO  
CANDIDATE  
DEBATES

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LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS EDUCATION FUND

**RETURN TO RESOURCE CENTER  
INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION  
FOR ELECTORAL SYSTEMS  
1101 15th STREET, NW 3rd FLOOR  
WASHINGTON, DC 20005**

This publication was researched and written by Marlene Cohn for the League of Women Voters Education Fund (LWVEF). It was edited by Monica Sullivan, Director of Publications. Matthew Farrey, Program Manager for Election Services, supervised the project. The oversight trustee was Carolyn Jefferson.

*Face to Face* was made possible by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

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**Pub #830, \$10.00 (\$8.00 for members) plus shipping and handling.**

**Order from LWVUS Publications Sales, 1730 M Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036.**

**Phone 202-429-1965, Fax 202-429-0854.**

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# INTRODUCTION

*Face to Face: The League of Women Voters Guide to Candidate Debates* is designed to help many different kinds of groups — including state and local Leagues of Women Voters — sponsor and produce effective, fair and interesting candidate debates. It is a revision of *Face to Face: A Guide to League-Sponsored Debates*, published in 1987 (and now out of print), a publication that was specifically addressed to Leagues.

This handbook draws from the debates experience of the League of Women Voters Education Fund and state and local Leagues across the country. Since its inception in 1920, the League has held debates to inform and motivate voters. In the process, the League has become closely identified with candidate debates and has developed unrivaled debate expertise.

Since 1976, the League of Women Voters Education Fund has sponsored at least 24 presidential primary and general election debates, all nationally televised. In 1992, state and local Leagues sponsored more debates than any other organization in the United States.

In carrying out our mission of encouraging the informed and active participation of citizens in government, Leagues of Women Voters will continue to be key sponsors of candidate debates. The League also wants to encourage and help other organizations to stage debates. This handbook is part of that effort.

It contains practical information, suggestions and advice that can be applied to all kinds of candidate debates — from dog-catcher to President. It is addressed to groups large and small, statewide and local, private and public. Some of the information, such as the legal considerations, apply only to the United States, but ideas on formats, moderators and sets, for example, can help guide debate production in other countries.

Use this handbook as a reference. Not all of it will apply to your situation. If you need more information or hands-on expert guidance, call your local League of Women Voters (listed in the phone book) for assistance.

**Good luck with your debate!**

Becky Cain, Chair  
League of Women Voters Education Fund  
June 1996

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Candidate debates are a key component of a political campaign because they provide voters with an opportunity to hear the candidates discuss the important issues and illustrate the differences between candidates. Sponsoring a candidate debate is providing an important public service. There are many questions that potential debate sponsors must ask themselves when planning a debate. This LWVEF publication answers all the questions about debate sponsorship in detail. Some of the most commonly asked questions about debates are briefly addressed below.

**Sponsorship** Who should sponsor debates? What are the characteristics of ideal sponsoring organizations? What are the regulations governing the sponsorship of debates?

**Criteria** What criteria may be used to determine which candidates should be invited to participate in debates?

**Format** What are the options for debate formats?

**Legal Issues** What are the major regulations governing the conduct of candidate debates?

**Financing** How can a debate be financed? What are the major costs to be considered?

## Sponsorship

Sponsors of debates range from Leagues of Women Voters and other civic groups to newspapers and broadcasters. Groups with an

interest in a particular issue area use debates to focus public attention on those issues and get the candidates to address them. Chambers of Commerce or Rotary Clubs, for example, sponsor debates for local offices and ask about candidates' tax policies and their support for small businesses. PTAs quiz candidates about educational goals and support for schools. Universities may hold debates focused on higher education and the concerns of young adults. Broadcasters and newspapers are increasingly involved in sponsoring debates, often in cooperation with a nonpartisan civic group.

It has become common for political party committees to hold debates for primary elections to help party members make decisions about candidates for nomination. Since 1988, general election presidential debates have been sponsored by a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, the Commission on Presidential Debates, founded by the two major national political party committees.

Generally, nonprofit, nonpartisan and journalistic organizations are permitted to hold debates for federal offices under Federal Election Commission (FEC) regulations and to broadcast them under Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulations. (see Chapter 2, Legal Considerations). Corporations and unions should not conduct debates for federal offices, but may provide a venue and/or financial support for a debate sponsored by a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization.

## Criteria

The criteria that a debate sponsor uses to determine which of the candidates should be invited to participate in a debate are a critical element of debate planning. Some examples of criteria include: constitutional eligibility, eligibility to be on the ballot, and evidence of a campaign or "significant" candidacy. Debate criteria should implement the debate goal, be nonpartisan and fair, and be applied objectively. The criteria should be adopted before the candidates have been invited and should clearly state that candidates should meet all the criteria.

## Format

The format of the debate also is critical to its success. There are many variations on debate formats. The question and answer with timed responses format is the most common. In this format there would be a number of questions to both candidates and their responses would be closely timed by the moderator. In cross-questioning the candidates ask questions of one another while the moderator acts as referee.

## Legal Issues

Candidate debates are regulated by federal and state election laws and regulations; broadcast debates are subject to Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rules. Although challenges to debate sponsors are infrequent, sponsors should understand the relevant regulations and take them into consideration when planning and staging a debate. Debates are high-stakes campaign

activities for candidates, and candidates who have been hurt politically by a debate or have not been invited to participate may challenge sponsors under these laws. The Federal Election Commission (FEC) and Internal Revenue Service (IRS) also have established regulations which debate sponsors must consider when planning a debate. There are other issues, such as copyright, state laws for some debates, candidate selection, etc. that should be considered.

## Financing

**The Debate Budget** Once you have decided on the basic plans for your debate, the first step is to develop a realistic budget. Think of the budget as a planning document, subject to revision as your costs and income become more clear.

Consider the following line items: debate manager stipend, volunteer expenses, secretarial overhead, consultants or professional fees, legal fees and costs, etc.

**Fundraising** If your organization does not have sufficient resources to put on a debate and if in-kind contribution from a broadcaster or from organization members will not meet all of your needs, you will need to solicit funds from others. Your debate is an important educational and citizen participation activity and deserves the support of local foundations, businesses, unions and individual donors. If your organization is designated by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) organization, funds contributed to it may be deducted from the donor's income for income-tax purposes.



# *Chapter 1*

## DEBATE BASICS

Most information about candidates, whether from the candidates themselves or filtered through journalists, comes to us in shorter and shorter snippets with each campaign. As most Americans turn from newspapers to television for their political information, we are faced with electoral decisions based on 30-second spot ads and soundbites. And for local politics and candidates, there is even less television coverage.

It is no wonder that candidate debates have become an expected part of political campaigns and that major candidates avoid them only at great political risk. The number of political debates and the kinds of sponsors have increased, and debate audiences are growing, especially for telecast or cablecast debates. One measure of the success and importance of debates is the extent to which they have become institutionalized as part of the American political process, as well as in established and emerging democracies around the world.

### **Debate Sponsors**

Organizations with an interest in promoting citizen participation, strengthening democracy, putting candidates' views on the record and providing voter information find that candidate debates help them meet their institutional goals. Sponsors range from Leagues of Women Voters and other civic groups to newspapers and broadcasters. Groups with an interest in a particular issue area use debates to focus public attention on those issues and get the candidates to address them. Chambers of Commerce or Rotary Clubs, for example, sponsor debates for local offices and ask about candidates' tax policies

and their support for small businesses. PTAs quiz candidates about educational goals and support for schools. Universities may hold debates focused on higher education and the concerns of young adults. Broadcasters and newspapers are increasingly involved in sponsoring debates, often in cooperation with a nonpartisan civic group.

It has become common for political party committees to hold debates for primary elections to help party members make decisions about candidates for nomination. Since 1988, general election presidential debates have been sponsored by a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, the Commission on Presidential Debates, founded by the two major national political party committees.

Generally, nonprofit, nonpartisan and journalistic organizations are permitted to hold debates for federal offices under Federal Election Commission (FEC) regulations and to broadcast them under Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulations (see Chapter 2, *Legal Considerations*). Corporations and unions should not conduct debates for federal offices, but may provide a venue and/or financial support for a debate sponsored by a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization.

### **Benefits of Debates**

The goal of most organizations that sponsor debates is to help voters make electoral decisions and to get candidates on the record so they can be held accountable for their stated positions on issues. To meet these goals, debates must attract and hold as large

an audience as possible and must deal with real issues in the campaign.

Candidates see debates as an opportunity to get their message out to the voters. But candidates also use debates to embarrass and attack opponents. Aware of the intensive news coverage engendered by debates, candidates strive to provide memorable soundbites and avoid fatal gaffes.

The voting public looks to debates for more than candidates' views on issues. They use debates to judge the candidates' characters, communication skills, sense of humor, ability to think on their feet and knowledge of public affairs issues. Post-debate surveys show that debates do influence voters' choices, especially undecided voters.

## **News Coverage**

Many more voters learn about the debate from news coverage than actually see the debate itself. That is why candidates and their staffs are so eager to meet with reporters immediately after the debate for "spin control," an effort to show a candidate's debate performance in the best possible light. Post-debate news coverage tends to emphasize the "horse race" aspect of the debate — who "won" and who "lost" — often using opinion polling and focus groups during and after the debate to substantiate the journalists' judgments. The news media also magnify the effect of any candidate's "gaffe" or mistake, and tend to favor reports on the candidates' debate strategy over the substance or contents of their responses.

Nevertheless, news coverage does get information about the candidates to many more voters, and debate sponsors should try to encourage and facilitate such coverage. Perhaps sponsoring organizations should engage in a little "spin control" of their own

and persuade news organizations to expand their coverage to provide substantive information about the candidates' stands on the important issues in the election.

## **Planning for Debate Sponsorship**

The amount of planning necessary to put on a successful debate varies greatly, depending on the size and complexity of the debate project. For even the simplest debate, a sponsoring organization needs to designate someone to set policy and someone to carry it out. Civic associations generally have policy making boards that can take responsibility for making debate decisions. Either leaders of the organization, or a paid or volunteer debate manager should implement the policy. For a large project, an organization may designate a Debate Committee to make detailed plans and contribute expertise and special skills to the effort.

Policy directives for the debate should be determined as early as possible. Policy decisions may include:

- setting the goals for the debate;
- adopting criteria for candidate participation (see Chapter 2, Legal Considerations);
- determining the scope of the debate project;
- selecting and overseeing debate staff (paid and volunteer);
- planning the preferred debate: format, site, schedule, broadcast plans;
- developing a budget and plans for financing;
- designating a negotiating team;

- ❑ determining the overall negotiating strategy and any nonnegotiable terms;
- ❑ planning the promotion strategy;
- ❑ setting up a process for quick decision making in the event of emergencies.

## The Debate Staff

The size and composition of the debate staff will vary considerably, depending on the debate plans. For a large, complex debate project, staff members might include:

**Debate Manager** No matter how large or small the debate project, it is important for someone to be in charge. The manager may be paid or volunteer. Either way, the duties of the debate manager should be written out in a job description and any stipend or payments for expenses specified. The debate manager should be on board early enough to be part of the planning process.

**Treasurer** Managing the finances of the debate is critical. The sponsoring organization's treasurer may carry out this task.

**Secretarial/Clerical Support** If your organization has administrative staff, they can perform these functions, or you can use volunteers and/or temporary staff.

**Promotion Coordinator** Promotion is an important component of a debate. A promotion coordinator will plan and carry out the promotion strategy and relieve the debate manager of these responsibilities.

**Consultants** You may need the services of consultants for promotion, graphic design, broadcasting or legal issues. Even if these services are donated, a written contract will eliminate misunderstandings about

responsibilities, lines of authority and deadlines.

**Volunteers** At every stage of planning and staging a debate, volunteers make the job easier. Membership organizations can involve their members in the process. Other sources for volunteers include civic groups, students, senior centers and volunteer clearinghouses.

*Volunteers should receive training, guidance and plenty of gratitude. If you are using many volunteers, a volunteer coordinator should be added to the debate staff.*

## Financing the Debate

### The Debate Budget

Once you have decided on the basic plans for your debate, develop a realistic budget. Consider the budget as a planning document, subject to revision as your costs and income become more clear. Consider the following line items:

**Debate Manager Stipend** Estimate the hours required, and investigate pay scales for comparable work in your community.

**Volunteer Expenses** Budget for dependent care, mileage, parking, food and other out-of-pocket expenses. Volunteers may, if they wish, donate their expense money back to the organization, but it should be their choice. Also consider budgeting for a reception or some other way of expressing appreciation to the volunteers.

**Administrative Support** For typing, correspondence, answering the phone, duplicating, etc. Even if your organization has office staff, the debate budget should include funds to reimburse the organization for the staff's time and pay for any outside help.

## A Sample Debate Timetable

This is a sample schedule, assuming a debate for a major office and plans for broadcasting the debate. Allotted planning time is one year, including fundraising. There is a spring primary and a November general election, but the debate is for the general election only.

<b><u>12 months ahead:</u></b>	<p>Development of Proposal          Organization's board determines:              Budget              Fundraising plans              Number and approximate timing of debates              Qualifications and terms of employment for debate manager and other staff              Assignment of board responsibilities              Selection of Debate Committee</p>
<b><u>11 months ahead:</u></b>	<p>Debate Manager hired</p>
<b><u>10 months ahead:</u></b>	<p>Board approves and adopts candidate criteria          Preliminary decisions: date, format, site, audience          Other staff and consultants hired          Debate Committee meets and sets up schedule of meetings          Fundraising begins</p>
<b><u>8 months ahead:</u></b>	<p>Promotion strategy developed          First informal contact with potential candidates          Negotiating team selected          Discussions with potential broadcasters begin</p>
<b><u>6 months ahead:</u></b>	<p>Letters sent to candidates running in primaries          Materials (posters, flyers, programs, etc.) designed          Site selection and review begins</p>
<b><u>5 months ahead:</u></b>	<p>Letters sent to winners of primaries and others who are eligible to participate          Negotiations with candidates begin          Broadcaster selected          Site selected          Selection of moderator and panel begins</p>
<b><u>3 months ahead:</u></b>	<p>Deadlines for: site confirmation, broadcast commitment,                              candidate commitment and format selection          Materials printed          Placement of advertisements, listings and PSAs begins</p>
<b><u>2 months ahead:</u></b>	<p>Volunteers recruited          Staff for debate site selected          Arrangements made for equipment at site          Criteria established for selection of audience and distribution of tickets          Moderator/panel selected</p>
<b><u>1 month ahead:</u></b>	<p>Invitations/tickets sent out          Media advisory sent on debate date and credentials procedure          Volunteers trained and assigned          Promotion campaign intensifies          Site arrangements reconfirmed          Candidates notified about groundrules, schedule and arrangements at site</p>
<b><u>1 week ahead:</u></b>	<p>Site reviewed with broadcaster          All details reconfirmed</p>
<b><u>2 weeks after:</u></b>	<p>Evaluation meeting</p>
<b><u>2 months after:</u></b>	<p>Thank you letters and mementos sent to all participants and volunteers</p> <p>Final Reports</p>

**Overhead** If your organization's office or equipment is used for the debate project, include overhead as a percentage of your budget (from 10 to 25 percent, depending on extent of use) or include the actual costs for office rent and equipment use.

**Consultants or Professional Fees** Budget sufficient funds to call on experts as needed for advice on management, broadcast technology, promotion strategy and techniques, or debate formats. Consultation may be available as an in-kind contribution.

**Legal Fees and Costs** Be prepared for the worst (see Chapter 2, Legal Considerations).

**Promotion** Include everything from on-air promotion spots to news releases. Allow for in-kind promotion assistance from your broadcaster.

**Advertising** Check prices of ads in your local and regional newspapers and in the *TV Guide* (broadcasters often get special rates for such paid ads), find out production costs for radio

and television public service announcements (PSAs) — and budget as much as you can.

**Evaluation** Include any planned surveys, focus groups or contracts with television ratings services, printing and compilation of evaluation questionnaires, and printing and distribution of final reports.

**Production Costs** Include costs of debate set, any site-related costs, microphones, make-up, signs, etc.

**Contingency** This catch-all item should be sufficient to cover unexpected expenses such as a satellite hook-up for statewide broadcast coverage, arrangements for the media, such as television monitors or phone hook-ups, security at the debate site, etc. Because debate expenses are so unpredictable, allow for more contingency funds than usual.

## Fundraising

If your organization does not have sufficient resources to put on a debate and if in-kind contributions from a broadcaster or from

<i>Tasks for Volunteers Include:</i>		
<i>Before the debate:</i>	<i>During the debate:</i>	<i>After the debate:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊛ produce materials</li> <li>⊛ answer inquiries</li> <li>⊛ make fundraising calls</li> <li>⊛ help with news releases and conferences</li> <li>⊛ design and distribute flyers and posters</li> <li>⊛ stuff and address invitations</li> <li>⊛ design, produce and distribute tickets and programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊛ take tickets and maintain security usher</li> <li>⊛ check news reporters' credentials and see that their needs are met</li> <li>⊛ escort candidates and VIPs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊛ monitor and clip news coverage</li> <li>⊛ help evaluate the debate.</li> </ul>

organization members will not meet all of your needs, you will have to solicit funds from others. Your debate is an important educational and citizen participation activity and deserves the support of local foundations, businesses, unions and individual donors. If your organization is designated by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) organization, funds contributed to it may be deducted from the donor's income for income-tax purposes.

Develop a clear, concise debate proposal, including:

- the need for greater citizen participation and voter education;
- your credentials as a nonpartisan, impartial organization that serves the public interest;
- other experience you have had in voter education or debate sponsorship;
- plans for your debate, including commitments from candidates and/or broadcasters;
- information about your organization, your officers and the debate staff;
- plans for evaluation and final reports;
- how contributions will be acknowledged and any other perks for funders;
- acknowledgment in the program and other written materials;
- mention in debate promotion and advertising;
- notice in the news release announcing the debate;
- mention in credits before and/or after the broadcast;
- preferred seating at the debate;
- attendance at a special reception;
- gift of a tape or transcript of the debate;
- a debates budget, with explanations of line items;
- information about any contributions (including in-kind) that already have been received or committed.

If, despite all of your efforts, you do not meet your fundraising goals, revise your budget and your plans accordingly. Check on such alternatives as seeking in-kind contributions from broadcasters, using an in-studio debate site or securing free air time for public service announcements to promote your debate. But don't be tempted to sacrifice quality or professionalism, and don't put an unfair burden on your organization.

It is important to keep accurate accounts of how debate funds are used. Good financial records will help you report to funders, make a pitch to future funders, evaluate the project and develop budgets for future debates and other events.

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## Chapter 2

# LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

### The Regulatory Framework

Candidate debates, as an important part of the American political process, are regulated by federal and state election laws and regulations; broadcast debates are subject to Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rules. Although challenges to debate sponsors under these rules are infrequent, sponsors should understand the relevant regulations and take them into consideration when planning and staging a debate. Debates are high-stakes campaign activities for candidates, and candidates who have been hurt politically by a debate or have not been invited to participate may challenge sponsors under these laws.

In addition, organizations designated as 501(c)(3) by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) must be especially careful to protect their status by making sure that their debates do not, in any way, promote or advance one candidate over others.

Sponsors who plan debates in accord with the applicable laws and regulations will be secure in the knowledge that they are meeting their legal responsibilities and will have a far better chance of prevailing if they face a legal challenge.

### Federal Election Commission (FEC) Regulations

The Federal Election Commission was established to enforce limits on contributions to the expenditures made on behalf of candidates for federal office by individuals or groups. The FEC rules apply only to candidates for *federal office*.

Under most circumstances, providing a platform for a federal candidate to address the public or providing information about a candidate is considered to be a contribution of “something of value,” and thus subject to the contributions or expenditures limitations and prohibitions of the federal election laws. However, nonprofit 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) type organizations, as well as broadcasters, bona fide newspapers, magazines and other periodicals may sponsor debates *without* triggering campaign finance limitations *provided* that:

1. The debates include at least two candidates;
2. The sponsoring organization does not structure the debate to “promote or advance” one candidate over another; and
3. The sponsoring organization uses “pre-established criteria” to determine which candidates to include in the debate. For general election candidates this criteria may *not* use “nomination by a particular political party as the sole objective criteria to determine whether to include a candidate in a debate.”

Organizations may use their own funds or accept donations from corporations or labor organizations for such debates. Sponsoring organizations should note that federal candidate events that do *not* meet the FEC definition of “debate,” such as single candidate appearances (“empty chair debates”) or consecutive candidate interviews (“forums”), *may* be considered as contributions subject to campaign finance limitations, or as illegal corporate contributions to a federal candidate.

## **Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Regulations**

The Federal Communications Commission regulates radio and television broadcasters and cablecasters. Under its regulations, any broadcaster or cablecaster that permits a candidate for any public office — federal, state, or local — to use its facilities must provide *all* other legally qualified candidates for the same office with equal opportunities for use. (Appearance by candidates on regularly scheduled, bona fide newscasts, news interviews and news documentaries are exempt from this requirement, as are appearances during broadcast coverage of news events such as debates.)

The FCC regulations apply to the debate broadcaster, not the sponsoring organization. However, debate sponsors should be aware of the restraints placed on the broadcasters. In order to qualify as exempt news events, debates must meet the following requirements:

- A broadcaster's decision to cover a debate should be based on a good faith, reasonable judgment of its news worthiness (and not on a desire to promote or disadvantage a particular candidate);
- Debates must not be edited and must be broadcast in their entirety;
- Debates should be broadcast live or reasonably soon after they take place;
- At least two candidates must appear in any debate.

## **Internal Revenue Service Rules**

Federal tax law provides that organizations which are exempt from federal income tax under section 501(c)(3) "may not participate or intervene, directly or indirectly, in any

political campaign on behalf of or in opposition to any candidate for public office." This prohibition applies equally to campaigns for federal, state and local office.

The IRS, however, considers forums and debates on political and social issues as educational activities that may be appropriately conducted by section 501(c)(3) organizations provided certain guidelines are followed. The general standards are that the procedures for the debates must not show a bias or preference for or against any particular candidate and that the overall effect must be fair and impartial treatment of all candidates, with nothing that promotes or advances one candidate over another.

### **More specific rules are these:**

1. The sponsoring organization must have a record of concern with public and legislative issues.
2. All viable candidates must be invited to the debate, and "reasonable, objective" criteria must be used to determine which candidates are "viable."
3. The choice of location for the debate must be dictated by non-political considerations.
4. Each debate must address a broad range of issues, including (but not limited to) issues considered to be of important educational interest to the organization's members. The debate can, however, be limited to the range of issues with which the sponsoring organization is chiefly concerned, provided the range is reasonably broad.
5. Questions must be prepared and presented to candidates by a nonpartisan panel composed of knowledgeable persons who are independent of the sponsoring organization. The format need not be limited to questions,



but can include a general discussion among the candidates.

6. Each candidate must have an equal opportunity to present his or her views, and questioning procedures must not be biased to favor or hinder any candidate.
7. The debate must be run by a moderator, who does not act as a spokesman for the organization's views on the subjects discussed, but has the sole function of ensuring that the ground rules are observed.
8. At the beginning and end of each debate, the moderator must state that the views expressed are those of the candidates, not of the sponsoring organization, and that the sponsorship of the debate is not an endorsement by the sponsor of any candidate.
9. The moderator must also state that all viable candidates have been invited. IRS staff members have informally advised that, if one or more of the invitees declines, the debate can go forward, but, in that event, the sponsor should exercise special care to avoid favoritism to those candidates who do participate.
10. The organization may report what happens at the debate, but must do so without editorial comment or endorsement and must circulate the report only through its normal channels of communication.

More liberal IRS rules apply to organizations that are exempt from federal income tax under section 501(c)(4). These organizations may intervene in political campaigns on behalf of candidates, subject only to the restriction that such intervention not be their primary purpose.

## **State Laws**

Although the FEC regulations apply only to candidates for federal office, many states have campaign finance laws and laws that limit the activities of tax exempt organizations. Sponsors of debates for candidates for state and local office should be aware of any relevant state laws.

## **Applying Regulations**

### **Primary Elections**

Primary election debate sponsors can treat each party's primary as a separate election, according to decisions by the FEC and the IRS and supported by the courts. That means that organizations can limit participation in a primary election to those candidates seeking the nomination of one party. Also, an organization may hold a debate for the candidates in one party's primary election without any obligation to hold debates for other parties' primaries.

### **Candidate Selection**

It is especially important to consider the regulatory constraints on candidate debates when deciding which candidates should be invited to participate. The most prudent route is to invite *all* the candidates running for a particular office (or, in the case of a primary election debate, all candidates for a particular party's nomination). There are many situations, however, when this is not wise or feasible. For example, one or more marginal candidates may be part of a large field of candidates running for the same office. The debate sponsor may decide that the public interest would be served best by limiting participation to "significant" candidates. A debate among a large number of candidates, especially if there are time constraints, might

be unmanageable and not provide voters with useful information.

Sponsors must make candidate selection decisions in a clear, fair and reasonable way, using "pre-existing criteria." To accomplish this, they should establish official selection criteria well in advance of selecting the candidates for a particular debate, and then use those criteria to determine which candidates are eligible to participate.

Sponsors must realize that, even if they use objectively applied selection criteria, they may be challenged by uninvited candidates and may face objections ranging from protest rallies to lawsuits or complaints to federal or state agencies. But if the sponsor has established official debate goals and selection criteria in advance of any decisions on which candidates to include, it will be possible to demonstrate that the sponsor's decisions were reasonable, not arbitrary, and not made to promote or disadvantage any candidate.

Even if a debate sponsor intends to invite all candidates running for an office, or if only two candidates are running, it is helpful to have criteria in place to deal with unexpected circumstances such as last-minute write-in candidates.

## A LEGAL GLOSSARY FOR DEBATES

**Federal Election Commission (FEC)** An agency established by the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 to administer the Act and enforce limits on contributions that can be made to, or expenditures that can be made on behalf of, candidates for *federal* office by individuals and groups.

**Candidate for Federal Office (for purposes of FEC regulations)** Persons running for President, Vice-President, senator, representative, delegate or resident commissioner to the U.S. Congress. A "candidate for federal office" has received contributions or made expenditures exceeding an aggregate of \$5,000; others have received or spent more than an aggregate of \$5,000 on her or his behalf; or, after written notification from the FEC, she or he has failed to disavow such contributions or spending by others.

**Debate (as defined by the FEC)** An event staged by a section 501(c)(3) or (c)(4) type organization or a broadcaster, cablecaster, or by bona fide newspaper or magazine that:

- includes two or more candidates;
- is staged in a way that it is fair to all participating candidates, i.e., the format does not promote or give an advantage to one candidate over the other(s); and
- the candidates appear concurrently, in face to face confrontations, with opportunities to respond to each other.

**Federal Communications Commission (FCC).** An agency established by the Communications Act of 1934 which regulates broadcasters and cablecasters. Section 315(a) of the Act provides that whenever a broadcaster or

cablecaster permits any legally qualified candidate for any public office to "use" a broadcast station or cable facilities, it must also afford equal opportunities for uses to all other legally qualified candidates for that office.

**Legally Qualified Candidate (as defined by the FCC)** An individual who:

- has publicly announced an intention to run for nomination or office;
- is eligible under the applicable laws to hold the office being sought; and
- either has qualified to be on the ballot, or has publicly committed to be a write-in candidate and can show that the candidacy is bona fide (for example, by making campaign speeches, distributing literature, issuing press releases maintaining a campaign committee, and/or establishing campaign headquarters.)

**Use (for purposes of FCC regulations)** Any broadcast or cablecast of a legally qualified candidate's voice or picture in such a way that he or she can be identified by listeners or viewers, even if the appearance is not for the purpose of discussing the candidacy.

**Nonpartisan Organization (as defined by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS))** A nonprofit organization that is recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as tax exempt under sections 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) and that does not endorse, support or oppose political candidates and parties.

Ideally, selection criteria should be developed for each debate sponsored, based on the nature of the election — primary, general, special, partisan or nonpartisan, the likelihood of minor party, independent or write-in candidates and whether the debates will be broadcast. Criteria used for one debate should not be automatically applied to another, but may serve as a guide. Criteria should be reviewed and readapted for each debate an organization sponsors.

**Note:** For debates involving general election candidates, “nomination by a particular political party” may not be used as the *sole* criteria for determining which candidates will be invited to appear, according to FEC regulations. Thus, it would not be permissible to establish advance criteria which stated that the Republican and Democratic general election nominees would be invited to participate in a debate.

### **How to Set Criteria for Candidate Selection**

Use the following checklist to set and apply criteria for determining candidates’ eligibility to participate in a debate:

1. Define the organization’s goal for sponsoring the debate — i.e.: educating voters about candidates’ views on issues and stimulating voter interest and participation in the election.
2. Develop criteria that:
  - implement the debate goal
  - are nonpartisan, fair, impartial and clear
  - can be applied objectively
3. Adopt the criteria before any candidates have been invited. For organizations with a board and/or officers, the criteria should be adopted as an official action.

4. State clearly that the candidates must meet *all* the criteria to be eligible.

5. Send written invitations to all candidates that are clearly eligible. Include copies of the debate goals and selection criteria.

6. If other candidates seek an invitation, the burden of proof is on them to establish eligibility. The sponsor may request information to support a candidate’s claim to eligibility.

7. Information about the debate goals and selection criteria should be included with publicity announcing the debate to the public and the news media. Send copies to the invited candidates and to others on request.

8. Once criteria have been adopted, stick to them and apply them consistently. The criteria are not negotiable; do not yield to pressure to change or waive them to accommodate particular candidates.

9. Develop and keep contemporaneous written documentation of the basis for determining not to invite a particular candidate, or for denying a candidate’s request to participate. Be sure that the rationale explicitly refers to the previously adopted selection criteria.

### **Copyright Issues: Who “Owns” a Debate and Why Does It Matter?**

Once a debate has been recorded —whether by video or audio tape or as a written transcript — the question of who controls the use and distribution of the record or profits from its sale falls under the copyright laws. Unless there is a written agreement to the contrary, everyone who participated in creating a debate, including the sponsor, the broadcaster, candidates, moderator, panelists, even producers and camerapersons, has a

## EXAMPLES OF CRITERIA THAT HAVE BEEN USED TO SELECT CANDIDATES TO PARTICIPATE IN A DEBATE

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**Constitutional Eligibility:** The candidate, if elected, must be legally qualified to hold the office under federal and state law.

### **Eligibility to be on the Ballot**

**Evidence of a Campaign:** (especially applicable in federal or statewide elections or in states where ballot access is unduly difficult or jurisdictions with a tradition of write-in candidates). The candidate has made a public announcement of an intention to run; the candidate has a campaign headquarters and staff, has issued position papers and has made campaign appearances.

**“Significant” Candidacy:** (used to limit debate participation to candidates who have a reasonable chance of being elected).

This is the most difficult criterion to establish and depends on information that is not always available, especially in local elections. Several factors can be used to measure significance, depending on the availability of information.

Choose those factors that are relevant to the particular office or election.

Choose those factors for which there is sufficient information to apply them objectively.

Clearly state those factors that will be used to measure significance.

State that the organization will use its “good faith judgment” in applying factors to determine “significance.”

1. Results of major, reliable, nonpartisan public opinion polls — use a reasonable percentage, i.e., 10 - 15 percent — to show evidence of support, keeping in mind the probable number of candidates. Possible polling sources include professional pollsters, independent newspapers and broadcasters and universities. Set a cut-off date, so there will be sufficient time to make final debate plans.

2. Eligibility for public matching funds (if applicable).

3. Coverage by the media as a recognized candidate.

4. Do **not** condition general election debate eligibility solely on status as nominee of a particular party.

potential claim to ownership of at least part of the final product.

An organization that wants to have control of the distribution and use of debate tapes and/or transcripts — for example, to prevent the use of debate excerpts in partisan political ads — should assert its claim of copyright ownership in written agreements with broadcasters and candidates.

A copyright notice should appear on all copies of tapes and transcripts (consisting of the word “copyright” or the letter “c” in a circle, the name of the copyright owner and the year of publication.) In order to challenge an infringement of a copyright, an organization should seek the assistance of a legal expert who specializes in this complex area of the law.

## Legal Protection

Plans for any major debate should include provision for legal advice in case it is needed. Organizations should be prepared to secure free or reduced rate assistance, perhaps from attorneys who are members or relatives of members or from law school faculties or major law firms that provide pro bono help to

nonprofit organizations. Most legal challenges are brought by candidates who are not asked to participate in the debate and are designed to stop the debate from happening. An organization that has easy access to legal assistance can cope with the disruption of an unexpected, last minute legal challenge.

Organizations may also need legal assistance to:

- Keep current with federal, state and local requirements.
- Review criteria for consistency with current applicable laws.
- Draft or review agreements with candidates, broadcasters or cosponsors and, if necessary, advise on the enforcement of agreements.
- Draft or review contracts with staff, consultants or managers of debate sites.
- Protect the organization’s copyright interests in the debate record.

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## Chapter 3

# DEBATE CONTENT

Debates play a unique role in election campaigns. In candidate-controlled campaign appearances and ads, candidates shape the agenda to their own ends, often by aiming attacks at their opponents on issues of little concern to the voters, and they avoid taking stands on important issues. The news media reports on the “horse race” — who’s ahead and why—and on campaign strategy. Debates, on the other hand, impel candidates to speak to the issues and challenge one another on the record. As sponsor, you are responsible for setting the tone of the debate and assuring that it meets your organization’s goals and the public interest.

The heart of a debate is the interaction between the candidates. A debate program includes other elements — introductions, credits, explanations of rules and procedures, directions to the audience and candidates’ opening and closing statements. The first rule is to use only those elements that are absolutely necessary. The second is to keep them short. You do not want to take too much of the limited time and audience attention away from the substance of the debate.

Get to the meat of the debate as soon as possible. Try to disperse introductions and explanations throughout the debate. For example, introduce each participant, panelist or candidate just before he or she is about to speak. Explain (briefly — the audience will catch on) the rules of each segment as you come to it. You can give the on-site audience instructions before the debate begins. Try to get the candidates to forgo opening statements. Promote your organization and credit your contributors at the end of the

debate or do it visually, using logos, a banner, signs or written programs. If your debate is broadcast, you can use a taped or live lead-in, with music, a picture of the debate site, symbols of the debaters’ political parties, contributor acknowledgements, etc. The goal is to start in with a bang. You want your audience to be enthusiastic — to stay tuned in.

## Issues and Questions

### Choosing Debate Issues

Some sponsors who represent special interests (such as senior citizens, a parent organization or a Chamber of Commerce) want to ensure that issues of interest to their members will be discussed. Other organizations strive to include a wide range of issues. Whatever your goal, the issues you choose should be relevant to the campaign and to the office being sought by the candidates. Don’t ask candidates for mayor about foreign policy or candidates for Congress about local school boundaries.

Keep the voters in mind as you choose the issues to be covered in your debate. Take your clues from polls that explore the electorate’s concerns and from questions asked of candidates at campaign appearances and on talk shows. Keep track of the issues analyzed by the news media during the campaign. Ask the public to contribute ideas for debate topics using contests, ads, a free 1-800 telephone hotline or the Internet.

### Effective Questions

If you are using a question-and-answer format, keep the questions short and clear. Candidates

faced with complex or multi-part questions can get away with answering only part of the question. A series of short questions on different aspects of the same topic works better than a long, convoluted question.

However, do not make assumptions about your audience's knowledge or understanding of the issue under discussion. Do not use jargon or acronyms. In a few words, put the question in the context of the campaign and the candidate's previously stated positions. If the issue is particularly complex or controversial, ask the candidate to help explain or define the issue (i.e., "What effect would a rise in interest rates have on the city's budget, and what would you do about it?").

Use questions that require the candidates to take a stand. General questions ("In your opinion, what are the three most important issues coming before Congress next session?") are a good way to introduce new topics, but you should follow up with specifics. Scenario questions ("What would you do if....?"), if well designed, may reveal a candidate's creativity and ability to make quick policy decisions, but the candidate can easily avoid the point of the question by denying the premise ("That would never happen in my administration."). Questions that require a quick "yes" or "no" answer can liven up a debate and put candidates on the record, but are more informative when candidates are required to justify or explain their answers.

Remember that a debate is not a quiz show. The candidate who can come up with the most

arcane bits of information will not necessarily make the best public official. Use questions that reveal the candidates' thinking about an issue, not their ability to recall facts quickly.

## Opening and Closing Statements

Candidates like opening and closing statements; they provide an opportunity to make prepared campaign speeches to the captive debate audience. Opening statements now are used rarely, and should be avoided. They tend to be shortened versions of the candidates' standard stump speeches. In the past, a few candidates have used them to launch attacks on their opponents, hoping to affect the opponent's performance in the remainder of the debate. Routine statements of a candidate's qualifications for office can be useful for voters, but they tend to get the debate off to a slow start.

Short closing statements do serve a purpose, allowing candidates to sum up their position, tie up loose ends and answer any charges that came up during the debate.

Try to get candidates to give spontaneous closing statements, related to what has been said during the debate. Such statements are far more interesting and revealing than prepared speeches. Besides, candidates have many other opportunities to give their standard campaign pitches.

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## Chapter 4

# DEBATE FORMATS

### Changing Trends in Formats

Although the televised presidential debate is now considered an institutionalized part of presidential campaigns, it is a fairly recent phenomenon. The first televised debates were the historic Kennedy - Nixon debates in 1960. The next presidential election debates were in 1976, and they have been held in every election since.

As the most watched and best remembered debates, the format used in presidential general election debates became a model for all other candidate debates. Presidential primary debate sponsors experimented with innovative formats from time to time, but up until 1992, the general election debates consistently used the traditional format of questions from a panel of journalists and timed candidate responses. Over the years, opportunities for follow-up questions and rebuttals were added, but the basic formula remained the same.

The 1992 presidential general election debates proved to be landmarks in the evolution of debate formats. The sponsor, the Commission on Presidential Debates, proposed four debates, all using the traditional format. The Democratic challenger, Bill Clinton, readily agreed, but the incumbent Republican, George Bush, held out for fewer debates and more favorable scheduling.

As a result of the impasse, the candidates negotiated an agreement calling for three debates (plus a vice-presidential debate), all in one week, and each with a different format. Independent candidate Ross Perot participated in all three debates. The first

debate used the traditional format. The second debate featured the candidates seated on stools and fitted with portable microphones taking questions from an audience of 209 uncommitted voters sitting in the hall. The third debate used a press panel for the first half and a strong moderator who encouraged interchange for the second half.

The debates were a huge success, attracting a viewing audience that increased for each debate, with the audience for the last debate estimated at 90 million. The new formats were clearly effective at keeping audiences interested and tuned in. Each one played up the strengths of a different candidate. Political analysts felt Perot and Clinton did best in the first debate, Clinton dominated the second, town-hall style debate and Bush recovered somewhat in the last debate.

In *Televised Presidential Debates* (1992), Hellweg, Pfau and Brydon distinguish between "televised debates" and "television debates." The distinction is important because it traces an evolution in presidential debate formats. From 1976 to 1983, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) required that debates be set up by an organization independent of the broadcaster and the political parties, and be broadcast live, in its entirety, as a news event. The resulting *televised* debate was held before a large audience with the candidates addressing their responses to the on-site audience. The event was covered and aired by one or more television stations or network, and it followed a rigid, formal format.



In 1983, the FCC ruled that radio and television stations could stage debates involving candidates of their choice without violating equal time provisions and that debates could be held in broadcast studios. The ruling led to a jump in the number and variety of debate sponsors. It also made the *television* debate possible. A television debate is much less formal and more free-flowing. It resembles a political “talk show” created for television.

In 1984, television producers felt free to experiment with presidential primary election debate formats. Ted Koppel and Phil Donahue moderated a three hour conversational primary debate, and CBS staged a debate in-the-round at the Columbia University moderated by Dan Rather. In 1988, William F. Buckley held separate “Firing Line” debates for the Democratic and Republican presidential primary races.

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 debates and evolving technology will make more creative and ingenious formats possible.

## Designing a Format

The format is what makes a debate different from an argument, a discussion or a joint news conference. It imposes rules and limits that guarantee that the debate is fair and impartial and offers each candidate an equal opportunity to be heard and to respond to the other candidates.

A debate format can be as simple as two candidates sitting at a table and discussing the issues in front of television cameras (as candidates for Prime Minister of Canada traditionally do) or it can feature strict time limits for questions, answers, rebuttals and

counter rebuttals. Format often becomes a matter of contention between sponsors, candidates and broadcasters. Sponsors want formats that provide information while keeping an audience’s attention; candidates want formats that showcase their strengths and present no surprises or risks; and broadcasters are looking for a good show — lively, contentious and unpredictable. The solution often is a debate broken into several segments with different formats (or a series of debates each with a different format). Debate analysts Kathleen Hall Jamieson and David S. Birdsell recommend a mixed format because the resulting debate allows voters to see how candidates fare (1) in direct confrontation, (2) in a formal question-and-answer or news conference format and (3) in delivering a set political speech, in their closing statements

The nature of the election campaign influences the choice of a format. Formats suitable for a general election debate with two or three contenders will not necessarily work for a primary debate that includes many candidates who do not differ sharply on issues. If a campaign is characterized by negative ads and name-calling, a structured format will put pressure on candidates to talk about issues rather than each other. On the other hand, an informal, interactive format will bring out the reasoning behind the candidates’ set responses and speeches.

## Types of Formats

Below is a look at some tried and true formats and how they work:

### 1. Traditional or Formal

This is the kind of debate encountered in high school and college debating competitions. It begins with a “proposition,” a statement of opinion on an issue. Each candidate addresses the proposition in an opening statement; each

**Table 1: Traditional or Formal**

Proposition is read	2 minutes
Opening statement - Candidate A	4 minutes
Opening statement - Candidate B	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

candidate then has an opportunity to rebut or respond to the statement. *See Table 1.*

This format limits the number of topics that can be addressed and forces candidates into a pro or con stance, leaving little room for agreements or gradations of opinion. While not generally used for candidate debates, this format can be effective for one segment of a longer debate, focusing the discussion on a topic on which the candidates hold sharply differing views. The rebuttal has become part of many other debate formats.

### Variations

□ 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).

## 2. 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. *See Table 2.*

Sometimes each candidate gets a different question. *See Table 3.*

Candidates like this format because it is relatively predictable and resembles a news conference. Incumbents, particularly, are practiced at anticipating questions and come prepared with answers. The exact timing makes it easy to fit the debate into a broadcast time-slot. However, it offers little or no opportunity for candidates to respond to each other. It tends to be fragmented, jumping from one issue to another with little continuity and even less depth. Its predictability and repetition make it tedious to watch.

**Table 2: Question-and-Answer with Timed Response**

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

## Variations

Using one or more of these variations will improve the classic debate format:

- 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** are an especially useful technique 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.

### 3. Loose Question and Answer/Cross Talk Format

This format resembles a good television talk show, with the moderator taking the role of host. The moderator poses questions or introduces issues and then guides the candidates in a discussion. During the discussion, the candidates may question each other, ask follow-up questions and offer rebuttals. It is the moderator's responsibility to ensure that all the candidates have an equal opportunity to speak to each issue and that the discussion does not stray too far away from the topic. The moderator must try to prevent

**Table 3: Question-and-Answer with Timed Response**

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

the debate from degenerating into a series of charges and countercharges.

This format is especially effective on television. It requires a strong moderator to keep the discussion on track and will work only if the candidates have agreed in advance to accept the moderator's authority.

## Variations

- Topics can be introduced using taped descriptions with or without brief impartial analysis. In this way, the basics of the topic are set out and the candidates can use their time to discuss their positions.
- Candidates have a specified amount of time to speak during the entire debate or debate segment. Timekeepers keep track of how much cumulative time each candidate has used, and inform the candidates, moderator and audience as each candidate is about to run out of time.

**Table 4: Cross Questioning**

Moderator introduces cross questioning segment	30 seconds
Candidate A poses question to Candidate B	30 seconds
Candidate B responds	2 minutes
Candidate B poses question to Candidate A	30 seconds
Candidate A responds	2 minutes

#### **4. Cross Questioning**

Candidates ask each other questions, and the moderator acts as referee, enforcing the rules and keeping the debate on track. This format works best as one segment of a mixed-format debate. Since the candidates control the agenda, they can avoid bringing up issues of substance and allow the debate to focus on personalities or ask each other “sweetheart” questions.

On the other hand, this format allows the audience to evaluate candidates by their questions as well as their answers. Voters can gain insight into such character traits as fairness, aggressiveness, originality and the ability to plan and act strategically.

##### **Variations**

- The groundrules may restrict the questions to specified issue areas.
- Candidates may submit the questions in advance to be asked by the moderator.

- The questions and answers may be subject to time limits.

#### **5. Questions from the Audience**

In this “town meeting” format, members of the audience ask the candidates questions in turn. The format can be lively and spontaneous, raise issues of real interest to the voters and put the spotlight on citizen participation.

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.

**A Word about Timing** Decisions about how much time to allot for response, rebuttals or cross talk can be difficult. One or two minutes may seem like an eternity if a candidate is trying to stretch out a simple answer to a simple question; it may seem grossly inadequate to explain the implications of a complex issue or policy position. Consider varying response times to suit the questions. One segment of a debate could have questions calling for quick answers (yes, I support; no, I oppose), while another segment allows sufficient time for analysis and explanation. Candidates should not be required to use all the time allotted to them.

Groundrules for timing should be agreed upon before the debate. Generally, a candidate will be allowed to finish a sentence, once started. If a candidate does not use all the time allotted for a response, the time usually cannot be applied to any other purpose or question (unless the format specifically allows use of accumulated time).

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.

### **The Questioners: Moderators and Panelists**

Every debate needs a moderator. Although the role varies greatly with the format, at a minimum the moderator, as the representative of the sponsor, enforces the rules and introduces the proceedings and the participants.

A panel of questioners, however, is an option. It once was thought that a panel of experienced news reporters could best ferret out information from reluctant candidates.

Now, questions come from many sources — the audience, the candidates themselves, the sponsor or the public. Still, candidates often prefer to face a panel of familiar faces and think of the panel as a buffer between themselves, the other candidates and the audience. However, news reporters often have their own agendas — to generate news headlines and draw attention to their own cleverness — that may conflict with the interests of the sponsor and the voters. As Jack Germond and Jules Witcover put it in their analysis of the 1992 presidential campaign, "...a single-moderator format produced far more coherent expositions of the differences among candidates than an examining board of posturing reporters."

### **Selection of Panelists**

If candidates insist on a panel for all or part of a debate, look for a variety in questioning styles and backgrounds. Choose a diverse panel, representing different media, different viewpoints and different groups in the electorate. Broadcasters should consider the need for diversity in choosing panelists and look beyond their own on-air talent. A panel should consist of at least three people and at most, five. A good guide to follow is that as the number of candidates in the debate increases, the number of panelists should decrease.

It is a given that panelists must have no previous relationship with any of the candidates. Journalists often are chosen because of their presumed neutrality and their familiarity with the election process and the issues. But consider academic or "think tank" issue specialists, a representative from your organization or from a civic group, a prominent citizen or a student (perhaps chosen through an essay contest) for a place on the panel.

Should the candidates have a role in the choice of a panel? If it were up to them, they would not look just for familiar faces, but for friendly ones. Do not allow candidates to have veto power over panelists. If they insist on having a say, allow each candidate a limited number of choices from a list of potential panelists, and make the final selection with those choices in mind. Settle panel selection early and announce the panel members publicly to avoid last-minute candidate objections.

### **Choosing a Moderator**

In the standard question-and-timed-response format, the moderator acts like an MC, introducing the participants and explaining what is happening. If there is a panel, the moderator does not even have to ask the questions. As the format becomes more flexible and open, the moderator's roles grow more complex and demanding. For example, in a cross-talk or cross-questioning format, the moderator must raise issues, manage the discussion, ask appropriate unprepared follow-up questions and make sure each candidate is treated fairly and has an equal opportunity to speak — in other words, act like a talk-show host without the ego.

So whether you select your organization's president or the broadcaster's best on-air talent as your moderator depends on what the moderator will be expected to do. Some characteristics to look for:

- Neutrality** The candidates will insist on a neutral moderator, but make sure your choice has had no identification with any of the candidates, parties or issues in the election.
- Authority** The moderator must manage the candidates and control the audience — timidity and gentility will not work.

- Confidence** The moderator should be at ease with the medium and the format.

- Spontaneity** Even the most rigid of debate formats are not immune from surprise, and flexible formats require a lot of fast thinking.

- Knowledge** The moderator should know the issues in sufficient depth to keep a response or discussion on target; if the format allows follow-up questions, the moderator should know when the topic has been covered and the candidates' positions are clear.

- Understanding** The moderator should be familiar with the sponsor's organization and its goals for the debate and should have a clear understanding of the format.

If your debate is being broadcast, the broadcaster can help find a good moderator; indeed, most broadcasters welcome the opportunity to give their on-air talent such distinguished exposure. While it is important to consider the candidates' various concerns in choosing a moderator, do not give the candidates a veto. The moderator represents the interests of the sponsor and the public and should be independent of the candidates.

### **Working with the Moderator and Panelists**

Establish a professional relationship with the moderator and panelists (if any). Agreements should be in writing, and stipends (if any) and the payment of expenses should be specified. In your letter of invitation, state your expectations for the role of the moderator or panelists, the topics to be covered and any briefings, rehearsals or other events they are expected to attend. Make sure moderators and panelists are well informed about your organization's decisions and rationale about formats, settings, broadcast arrangements, site

and so on, but invite them to make suggestions for changes and improvements. It is important for the participants to be comfortable with the final arrangements. Provide copies of any written agreements with candidates, format descriptions or arrangements with broadcasters or management at the site.

Discuss the role the moderator or panelists will play in asking questions or introducing topics. Experienced journalists usually do not need or want written questions. However, as a sponsor, you should have some control over the content of the debate. Make your expectations clear. Discuss your goals for the debate and the issues you expect the candidates to address; provide a list of topics to be covered and suggestions for questions. Supply the moderator with a script or notes for introductions, credits, instructing the audience, explaining the rules, etc.

A written schedule of the times, places and agendas for briefings and rehearsals (if any) is useful. Specify when the moderator and panelists are to be at the debate site and invite them to any planned activities before or after the debate. Allow sufficient time for the moderator to meet the candidates and to instruct the on-site audience on its role and expected behavior.

About a week before the debate, meet with the moderator and panelists to go over debate plans and make sure there is mutual understanding and agreement on the proceedings. If you are using a panel, go over their planned questions to see that they are not duplicative and that they cover a range of issues. If you are using a new or complex format, have a dry run or mock debate to ensure it will work as expected.

## Chapter 5

# NEGOTIATING WITH CANDIDATES

So all you have to do is design the perfect debate, invite the candidates and they will come — right? Well, maybe. Candidates in relatively minor elections, and those who are challenging powerful incumbents are grateful for any free opportunity to appear before the public and may, indeed, jump at the chance to debate, even on your terms.

But debates are big risks for candidates, especially front-runners, who usually have the most to lose and the least to gain from participation in a debate. Candidates have seen their chances for election slip away because of one debate gaffe. Candidates running for major offices, with funds to buy time on radio or television, may try to trade their agreement to debate for conditions that will show them off most favorably. Or they may play off one debate sponsor against others, looking for the best terms.

Increasing public expectations that candidates will appear in a debate makes it politically costly for most candidates to refuse outright. But candidates will try to exact conditions from sponsors that give them control over how the debate is run — over format, site, panelists, content, audience, for example. More and more often, candidates bypass the sponsors and negotiate conditions among themselves, presenting the sponsor with a “done deal.” The result may be a debate that showcases the candidates at their best, but provides little useful information to voters — or a debate that is so blatantly unfair, the sponsor must withdraw.

## Getting Ready to Negotiate

To maintain control over a debate, the sponsor should be prepared to negotiate terms with the candidates (or, in the case of elections for major offices, the candidates’ staffs). The goal of negotiations is to ensure the participation of the invited candidates in a fair, impartial debate that will help voters make informed election choices. Keep in mind that a debate must include at least two candidates. In a two-person race, you cannot threaten a recalcitrant candidate with an “empty-chair” debate that gives the opponent a free ride (see Chapter 2, Legal Considerations).

Start planning for negotiations as soon as the list of potential candidates becomes clear. You will need two kinds of information:

**1. Information about the candidates, the election and the political climate in which it is being held.** Know the candidates’ strengths, weaknesses and major concerns — especially attitudes toward and past experiences with debates. Understand the dynamics of the election — who’s ahead, who has the most to lose or gain from debates, how many candidates will run, how many debates are likely to occur and the potential debate sponsors. Consider the candidates’ schedules, how many debates they will probably agree to, and when. Understand the political climate — the public demand for the candidates to debate, the level of contentiousness, the prevalence of personal attacks and the major issues as seen by the candidates and by the public.

**2. Be certain about your goals as a sponsor, and how you aim to reach them.** Have a



clear general idea of how you want the debate to proceed, a mental picture of your “ideal” debate. This should include ideas about format, content, questioners, site, timing and scheduling (i.e., close to the election or several weeks before). As you plan your debate, keep in mind what you know about the candidates and the campaign. For example, in a mud-slinging contest, you should plan a more controlled format to keep the focus on issues, not personalities.

Decide what is negotiable and what is fixed, what compromises you are willing to make and what matters of principle are off the table. Sponsors must protect the fairness and impartiality of the debate. They should control decisions about which candidates are invited to participate (consistent with the criteria they have adopted). Candidates should not dictate (or know in advance) what questions they will be asked or have veto power over the selection of moderators or panelists.

### The Negotiating Team

Designate a team of at least two people to handle negotiations with candidates — one to talk and one to listen and take notes. You may decide not to include the president or head of your organization on the team so that you have a “higher authority” to go to for official approval of tentative agreements. Above all, the negotiating team should be well informed and confident, fair and professional. It should be prepared to keep control of the negotiating process to ensure the rights of all the participating candidates.

The team should come to negotiations with the following:

- ❑ The legal conditions for debates — what can and cannot be done under the laws and regulations.

- ❑ Information about the organization’s debate history — what has worked and what has not; the organization’s credentials as an effective and fair debate sponsor.

- ❑ The organization’s initial proposals for the debate.

- ❑ Debate options — different formats, sites, dates, questioners, etc. and the advantages and disadvantages of each option.

- ❑ Information about the candidates’ backgrounds, history of debate participation and political concerns.

### The Negotiating Process

The first approach to the candidates is the letter of invitation to participate in the debate. (Send the letters by registered mail so you have proof that they were received.) Include as few specifics as possible in the letters. You want to avoid getting an instant refusal because the candidate doesn’t like the proposed format or can’t appear on the suggested date. Instead, inform the candidate that a representative of your organization will be in contact to arrange for a meeting.

It is best to hold the initial discussions with each candidate (or staff) separately and under conditions of confidentiality. Start with the strongest (and probably most difficult) candidate, if you can. Once you have an agreement with the frontrunner, you can bring it to the other candidates for approval or modification.

Develop an agenda for your meeting, but be flexible. Start with the major issues — the date, the format, the content, the questioners. Once you agree on the essentials, the details may never become an issue. However, if one or more candidates want assurances about the groundrules or details of the debate — such as

the setting, audience, use of notes, arrangements for news coverage, etc. — provide them with a written description of your plans and discuss possible modifications.

If and when the candidates disagree, it is time to bring them together to work out an agreement. The negotiating team should be present to protect the organization's interests and goals and to ensure that the debate will be fair and impartial.

The final result of the negotiations should be a written agreement signed by each candidate (even if all earlier discussions were with the campaign staff) and the chief officer of the sponsoring organization. This agreement may be as general or specific as necessary. It should be a public document and, if appropriate, made available to the news media. If you cannot reach agreement on a debate that meets your organization's goals and is fair, impartial and informative, you may decide to withdraw sponsorship. Be sure the candidates know that if you decide to do so, you will make a public announcement of your decision and the reasons for it.

After negotiations, keep the candidates informed about arrangements not included in the agreement, such as ticket distribution, debate furniture, photo opportunities, press coverage, etc. If there are objections, you will still have time to make adjustments.

## **Major Sticking Points and How to Resolve Them**

### **Participation in the Debate**

Once you have the candidates' written or publicly announced commitment to participate in your debate, it becomes easier to resolve other issues. Try to commit them to debate as soon as possible. For example, if you are

conducting primary debates, ask the candidates to agree to participate in general election debates if they win. Or get a written commitment to participate in response to your initial invitation.

Of course, candidates may hold back on committing to debate until they get agreement on the most favorable conditions. If there are several potential sponsors, they may shop around for the best terms. Despite the political risk, a candidate may decide that, no matter what, participation in a debate will hurt more than it will help.

There are ways to persuade a reluctant candidate to debate. Get the news media on your side. Make an early media announcement of your plans to stage a debate. Contact editorial boards and get their endorsements. Involve the public by, for example, asking them to submit questions. Hold essay and poster contests in schools. In other words, make the debate seem inevitable, and raise public expectations to the point where the candidate's refusal to debate will carry a very high political cost.

However, if a candidate has weighed the costs and benefits of taking part in your debate and has decided to sit it out, there is not much that you can do about it. If there are at least two candidates eligible and willing to debate, you are under an obligation to them to hold the debate — but you cannot hold, or threaten to hold, a "debate" with only one candidate.

Even after all your efforts have failed, continue to make your case to the public. Your organization should get credit for its good faith effort to serve the voters. And, there is always another election coming up.

## **Scheduling**

Scheduling a debate often is a real problem for candidates. There are many conflicting demands on a candidate's time during a campaign. Incumbents must schedule debates and other campaign appearances around their duties as public officials. Legislators must be on hand for important votes.

There are tactical considerations as well. A weak debater may prefer an early debate, so there is plenty of time to recover before the election. A candidate who expects to do well may prefer an early debate to gain momentum and attract campaign funders, or a late debate to knock off an opponent and influence undecided voters.

Sponsors should schedule debates when interest is high and coverage will be good, but not so close to an election that charges made by candidates cannot be answered. They should be sensitive to candidates' concerns, for example, by holding debates on weekends when legislatures are not in session or after the session is over (although in recent years, the U.S. Congress seems to be adjourning later and later, even in election years).

Once agreement is reached on the scheduling of a debate, the date should not be changed except for a genuine emergency (a candidate's illness, a death in the family, a natural disaster, etc.). Candidates may try to change the date because of unforeseen events, such as last-minute visits from party bigwigs or a late legislative session. A previously scheduled — and promoted — debate should take precedence over such conflicts. The sponsor should, however, make every effort to accommodate a candidate's legitimate concern, for example by allowing the candidate to "appear" in the debate via satellite transmission from Washington or the state capital.

The best way to hold candidates to their scheduling commitments is to get a firm agreement as early as possible, publicize the debate date widely as soon as agreement is reached and firmly maintain that the debate is an important campaign event that should not be preempted.

## **Audience**

If the debate is not televised, there will be an audience at the site where the debate is held. If the debate is televised, a "live" audience is an option, not a requirement. Some candidates are at their best before a live audience, especially if it is heavily loaded with a cheering section of their friends and supporters. Others worry about the potential for disruption and prefer the security of a broadcast studio. Sponsors may want the excitement and liveliness of an audience, whose members represent the voting public. On the other hand, they may not want the expense and bother of getting a site, sending out invitations and assuring security. It is no wonder that audience questions are controversial.

Let the candidates know your needs and preferences up front. If you cannot afford a hall or the broadcaster insists on a studio setting, the issue is not negotiable. If you do decide on an audience, work with the candidates on groundrules that cover everyone's concerns:

- Audience selection: ticket only; by invitation; free entry.
- The number of tickets each candidate will get for staff, supporters and family.
- Rules governing audience reaction: silence; no booing, cheering or whistling; applause only.

Questions from the audience: will they be allowed? will they be solicited beforehand? will they be screened? will they be asked by the audience member or the moderator?

## Formats

Candidates tend to prefer tried-and-true debate formats. With so much at risk, they don't want any more surprises than necessary. Even candidates who have never debated feel comfortable facing a panel of familiar media types. Sponsors, however, want to open up the debate format, encouraging interaction between the candidates. They want to avoid a dull, overly rigid debate formula.

You will have taken the candidates' preferences, strengths and weaknesses, and the nature of the contest, into consideration when designing your debate. The result may well be several segments, each with a different format, geared to the candidates' debating styles (or a series of debates, each with a different format.)

If the candidates still balk at your preferred formats:

Point out the advantages and disadvantages of each format.

Show clips of debates using the various formats.

## EXAMPLES OF GROUNDRULES

**These are examples of debate details that should be resolved before the debate occurs:**

There will be no substitutes or stand-ins for the candidates.

All news releases about the debate will be handled by the sponsoring organization and sent simultaneously to all the candidates. Confidentiality of the debate negotiations will be maintained by the candidates and by the sponsor.

Each candidate will have access to the site several hours before the debate to check on the lighting, acoustics and set design.

No campaign banners, signs, literature handouts or other campaign paraphernalia will be allowed in the debate hall.

The audience will be asked to refrain from applauding or in other ways demonstrating support or nonsupport for a candidate.

There will be no audience reaction shots during the debate, although panning of the audience before and after the debate may be allowed.

The moderator will introduce the candidates using a 15-second introduction provided by the candidates.

Candidates will be introduced by title. Thereafter, "Mr." and "Ms." will be used.

The winner of a coin toss on the day of the debate will have first choice of podium position.

The candidates will remain behind the podiums at all times during the debate. Stools will be provided.

A pitcher of water and a glass will be on a shelf in each podium.

The candidates will bring no notes or props. Each candidate will be provided with a legal pad and pens for taking notes during the debate.

There will be a coin toss to determine candidates' order of taking the first question and making closing statements.

Time limits on responses will be strictly observed. A timekeeper will hold cards, visible to the speaker, indicating how much time remains. When the "stop card" is shown, the speaker must end his/her speech within 10 seconds.

The moderator will have the responsibility for enforcing time limits. The moderator also will have the authority to interrupt the proceedings to enforce the groundrules and format that were agreed to by the candidates.

The moderator may restate the question.

The panelists and moderator may interrupt the candidates if they believe the candidates are straying from the subject.

The candidates will not interrupt one another.

The candidates' closing statements should be significantly related to the matters debated previously. Because there is no opportunity for rebuttal following the closing statements, candidates should refrain from personal attacks or charges.

No flash cameras or motor-driven cameras will be used during the debate.

Photographers and the press will be placed at a reasonable distance from the candidates and microphones to reduce distractions.

A press area will be provided near the entrance to the debate for arrival and departure photographs of the candidates and interviews after the debate if the candidates wish to speak to the press.

Candidates are invited to remain for a reception and a media availability following the debate.

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## Chapter 6

# BROADCASTING YOUR DEBATE

What if you held a debate and nobody came — or watched or listened? Without an audience, a debate is an exercise in futility. That is why it is important to put just as much energy and planning into promoting your debate — and getting it into people's homes via television, radio or cable — as into the debate itself.

A debate does not have to be broadcast to be successful. A hotly contested campaign that generates a lot of interest may attract a large on-site audience. Or you can hold a debate before a captive audience at a school, college or work place, or at a civic association meeting or for your own members.

But it is getting more difficult to get people to come out to meetings and events. Time has become a scarce resource. Fortunately, with a growing number of broadcast outlets, it is becoming easier than ever to get a debate on the air. Now that debates are an expected part of a political campaign, broadcasters who know about your debate may very well come to you with offers to air it.

Broadcasters themselves are becoming more and more active as debate sponsors. If your organization is known for its experience with debates, one or more broadcasters may seek you out for assistance. If you can work out an arrangement that meets your goals — with special attention to issues involving control and credit — this kind of partnership may prove a very effective way to get information about candidates to voters. Keep in mind that the interested broadcaster is likely to stage a debate with or without your cooperation.

### Choosing a Broadcaster

Your choice of a broadcaster depends, to some extent, on the audience you are trying to reach. In a debate for a statewide office or in a large congressional district, you may need more than one station to cover the jurisdiction. In a large county or city, your best bet may often be a major network outlet (including PBS). But in a small municipality or rural county, you do not need the reach of a metropolitan station.

Commercial and public television stations and cable outlets that devote much of their programming to news and public affairs have a built-in audience for debates. Don't write off local cable channels. About 75 percent of Americans now have access to cable, and surveys show that about 50 percent of cable subscribers watch community access channels on a regular basis. Such channels are eager for program material, and will be happy to show a debate not just once but several times.

Radio is more fragmented than television, and does not hold an audience in the same way. People tend to listen while driving or as background to some other activity. However, the proliferation of all-talk or all-news stations and the popularity of talk shows has brought avid listeners to programs focused on public affairs. Whether your debate is televised or not, use radio to promote your debate and to reach special audiences, such as ethnic and racial minorities, older people or rural residents

In making your choice, consider how much overall promotion a broadcaster is willing to contribute to the debate, and what other in-kind contributions are offered, such as:

- A clean feed (no station identification) to stations in other media markets.
- Mult boxes (a sound system with multiple outlets).
- Television monitors for the news media or overflow viewing.
- Lighting.
- House sound and audience seating (if in studio).
- Backdrop and furniture for the set.
- Microphones for participants.
- Make-up for participants.

### **Contacting Broadcasters**

Contact a variety of broadcasters as soon as you can tell them about the initial plans for your debate. Broadcasters will be more likely to carry your debate if they are part of the planning process, but they also will want assurances that you can get the major candidates to commit to participation.

Start by sending letters to the general managers (or equivalent) of selected broadcast outlets. Your letter should be strong and persuasive, and include a brief outline of your debate plans. Play up the debate's importance as a public service and its appeal to an influential audience. Follow up promptly with a phone call requesting an appointment with the staff members responsible for making programming decisions (at large stations, the station manager or program director will be involved in the decision, as well as the news or public affairs director; in smaller stations, one person may take several of these roles.)

Bring to the meeting a packet of material that includes:

- Information about your organization, its goals for the debate and its previous debate experience.
- Your criteria for candidate participation in the debate.
- Any testimonials you may have from other broadcasters who have worked with you.
- A description of your debate plans up to this point, including formats, site suggestions and promotion plans.
- Written commitments from candidates (if you have them).

Come prepared with your ideas, but be willing to consider suggestions from the pros. Be very clear about which issues are up for discussion and which are nonnegotiable.

The outcome of your discussions should be a written agreement that covers the major responsibilities of your organization and the broadcaster. The agreement is just the beginning of your working relationship with the broadcaster and will not cover all the details involved in a debate.

### **Potential Sticking Points**

#### **Scheduling**

Finding a good date, day and time to air a debate can be difficult. Broadcasters will want to avoid important sporting events, ratings sweeps and season premieres (all of which come in the fall, during the general election campaigns). Broadcasters will not want to "bump" a popular program for a debate or have a debate lead into an important show or the local nightly news. Be aware of the

broadcaster's concerns and try to work around them. Suggest a time-slot usually filled by a public affairs program. If you cannot work out a mutually agreeable time-slot, ask the broadcaster to air a tape of the debate as soon after it occurs as possible.

## **Exclusivity**

You want your debate to be seen by as wide an audience as possible and certainly over the entire jurisdiction covered by the election. But the station, having put a lot of its own resources into the debate, wants exclusive rights to its broadcast. Compromise by giving the station "market exclusivity," allowing it the right to exclude other stations in the same viewing area, but ask for a "clean feed" (transmission without the station's identification) to a station in another part of the state or congressional district. Or seek permission for another station to air a tape of the debate at a later time or date. Your broadcaster may agree to simultaneous or delayed coverage by a station with a different audience, such as a public broadcasting station or a local cable outlet.

## **Debate News Coverage**

Work with the broadcaster to assure access and facilities for news reporters, including still photographers and debate footage for newscasts on other stations. Reporters should be able to watch the debate live or on monitors on site.

## **Moderator and Panel**

Many stations consider a debate an excellent opportunity to showcase their star anchor as moderator. If the moderator demanded by the station meets your requirements for impartiality, authority and knowledge and is

willing to work with your format and issues, he or she may be a good choice. If not, and the station is adamant, perhaps you should be looking for another broadcaster. Do not let the broadcaster stack the panel (if there is one) with its on-air talent nor dictate the choice of panelists.

## **Retaining Rights**

The broadcasters will be just as concerned as you are that tapes of the debate not be used for partisan campaign ads or other unsuitable purposes. Let the broadcaster know if you have any plans for rebroadcasting the debate (for example, on C-SPAN or local cable) but don't give up your rights (see Chapter 2, Legal Considerations).

## **Commercials**

If the station insists on selling advertising time during the debate, make sure that any ads come at a logical break and will not disrupt the proceedings. Do not allow political ads, even for other offices, during and immediately before and after the debate.

## **The Debate Site**

The broadcasting station may prefer that you hold the debate in its studio. If you agree, but want an audience, make sure its facilities are adequate. Work with the broadcaster on a set and background that meet your standards and are acceptable to the candidates. If you are planning a debate at a special location — a historic building, a university or a large auditorium, for example — make sure it has the technical facilities the broadcaster needs. Most larger stations now have the technical resources to broadcast easily and routinely from a remote site.

## Issues to Be Settled Between Sponsor and Broadcaster

- Who decides on the format?
- Will the station have a person on the panel or as moderator? What exclusivity is involved — i.e., no other people for competing broadcast stations?
- Who chooses the moderator and panelists?
- Will the head of the sponsoring organization make a statement? What other involvement will the sponsor have in the actual broadcast?
- Will the station place the program in a time period that will attract an information-oriented audience?
- How much promotion will the station dedicate to the debate?
- How many days before the debate will the on-air promotion begin?
- How often will the promotion be run? Who will produce the promo?
- How will the promotion represent the relationship between the station and the sponsor?
- Will the station buy advertising on other media (radio, newspaper, *TV Guide*) to promote the debate?
- Will the station produce a public service announcement for the sponsor?
- Who will send news releases to the media and who will approve them?
- Will organization representatives be available to talk with other media?
- Will the station notify listing services of debate times?
- Will the sponsor or the station organize any activities to promote the debate?
- Who pays for the debate facility?
- Who pays for security for the debate?
- Who coordinates access to the debate (for media, the sponsoring organization's officers and members, the public), including issuing invitations and distributing tickets?
- Who pays for the production costs (set design, signs on the set, personnel costs, talent fees or, if not in studio, lights, electricity, transmission of signal to the studio)?
- What signs will be used on the set?
- What if any credits will the sponsor display at the beginning and end of the telecast?
- How will the telecast reflect the relationship between the sponsor and the television station?
- Who will pay for the transmission of the debate to other stations?
- If any legal costs are incurred during the production of the televised debate, who pays the legal fees?
- Who owns the rights to the debate?



## **Control**

The most difficult issue to resolve with a broadcaster is the most fundamental: Who is in charge?

If you are producing a debate and the broadcaster is covering it, maintain your control. You should, of course, work with the broadcasting staff to make their job easier and take their suggestions into consideration, but you have the final say on the major decisions.

If you are cosponsoring with a broadcaster, make sure that areas of responsibility are laid out clearly and in writing; important decisions should be mutually agreed to.

If a broadcaster is putting on the debate and asks for your help, be equally clear about areas of responsibility and matters of credit, but the broadcaster has the final say. Do not, however, allow your organization's name to be used in connection with a debate that violates your organization's principles or does not meet its standards.

## Chapter 7

# PROMOTING THE DEBATE

In order to get voters to come or tune in to the debate, you must promote it effectively. Good promotion of your debate accomplishes several goals:

- Getting candidates to agree to debate.** Reinforcing citizens' expectations that there will be a debate will make it more difficult and politically costly for candidates to back out of participation.
- Locking in agreements.** Informing the public about commitments from candidates, panelists and broadcasters will make pulling out of an agreement to participate less likely.
- Attracting an audience.** This includes providing basic information (date, time, location, broadcast availability, candidates, office sought), and creating an atmosphere of excitement and anticipation about the debate.
- Informing the electorate.** The actual debate audience will be only a fraction of the number of people who will benefit from the debate. Post-debate news stories and commentary will provide information about the candidates, their performance in the debate and their positions on issues to many more potential voters.

## **A Promotion Strategy**

If your organization is not familiar with promotion techniques, this is the time to study up. Look to your library for publications that provide advice on working with media and basic promotion techniques. The League of Women Voters publication, *Getting Good Media Coverage* (available from the League of Women Voters of the United States, 1730

M Street, NW., Washington, DC 20036, 202-429-1965, Pub. #1000, \$2.50, \$2.00 for members) provides information about the basics, such as effective news releases and press lists, editorial board meetings and radio and television interviews. Get advice from other organizations, including your broadcaster.

Coordinate your promotion schedule with the major participants (candidates, broadcaster, your organization's officers). Before you issue a news release, notify anyone whose name appears in the release. Don't put anyone in the position of answering questions about a release they don't know about.

There are many opportunities for promotion as you plan, produce and evaluate a debate. Take advantage of them. Some newsworthy events include:

- A formal decision to have a debate is made.
- You announce your criteria for candidate participation.
- A candidate has committed to participate.
- A moderator has been selected.
- The debate date, time and site are confirmed.
- A broadcast arrangement has been made.
- The post debate comments and ratings are in.

## Developing Good Media Relations

Designate one person (usually the head of the organization) to be the spokesperson and one person (the debate manager or the promotion coordinator) to maintain contact with the media and be available to respond to routine questions and requests for information.

Develop a list of media contacts. Newspapers and broadcast outlets in your community can be found in the *Gebbie Press All-In-One Directory*, the *Editor & Publisher International Yearbook*, or *Broadcasting and Cablecasting Yearbook*, available in libraries. State broadcasting associations can provide information on local stations.

Include the wire services on your list. They supply news to many broadcasters and small newspapers. Check out the datelines on stories in your local newspaper, and find out if they originate from the Associated Press (AP) or United Press International (UPI). Other news services include Gannett News Service, Copley News Service and the services of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. The wire services maintain “daybooks,” listings of the events taking place in the community on any given day. UPI and AP have the most comprehensive daybooks. List all debate activities, including news briefings and related public events as well as the debate itself.

Call newspapers and broadcasting stations to find out who on their staff covers political news and should receive your news releases. They might include:

**Television stations and radio stations:** station manager, program director, news director, assignment editor.

**Newspapers:** political reporters, political columnists, city desk, editor.

Send basic debate information — date, site and participants — to all the outlets on your list. Select key contacts to receive special attention. Send them news releases to announce important events, invite them to news conferences and briefings and arrange to meet with them to arrange for feature stories, debates coverage and editorial support.

## Promotion Techniques

Use a variety of techniques to promote your debate. There are three major categories:

### Paid Promotion

Paid promotion includes everything from paid newspaper and television ads to posters and flyers. When you pay for promotion, you can count on getting your message out and you can control the content and the timing:

### Posters, Notices and Flyers

- Post in public places, shopping centers, libraries, and schools and hand out at community and political meetings.
- Use eye-catching colors and graphics.
- Keep short and uncluttered; include date, time, site and broadcast times, candidates and electoral contest.
- Include a phone number for further information.

### Print Ads

- Costs are high, so consider placement and timing carefully.

- Run ads as close to the debate date as possible.
- Advertise a broadcast debate on the television page or in the weekly TV guide.
- Use logo or photographs for eye appeal.
- If your organization is nonprofit, seek an in-kind contribution toward the cost of an ad.
- If you are working with a broadcaster, ask the station to buy advertising in the newspaper and the *TV Guide*.
- Don't neglect less costly outlets, such as weekly neighborhood papers and papers aimed at ethnic or racial minorities.

### **Radio Ads**

- Radio ads are relatively inexpensive.
- To reach a diverse audience, spread ads among different stations and different times.
- Work with station's advertising manager on message and placement.
- Use a preproduced, taped or scripted announcement.

### **Television Ads**

- Network affiliates and large urban stations are probably very expensive and may include a much larger viewing area than you need.
- Seek in-kind contributions and cooperation from your broadcaster, including production of a "promo," a short 30- or 10-second spot announcement of the upcoming debate.

- Investigate independent stations and cable outlets.
- Begin on-air promotion no sooner than seven days before the debate.
- The ad should reflect the excitement and importance of the debate, using pictures and graphics and should include, on screen and in voice-over, the debate date, time and channel.

### **Unpaid or Free Publicity**

This category includes editorials, news stories, appearances on newscasts and talk shows and public service announcements (PSAs) on radio and television. You have to work hard for free publicity and it cannot be controlled or predicted, but it can be very effective.

### **Public Service Announcements (PSAs)**

- Free air time is offered to nonprofit organizations by radio and television stations to fulfill their public service obligations.
- You must produce a 30- or 10-second announcement, and "sell" it to stations.
- Contact television and radio stations before you invest in production of a video or audio PSA. The public service director will give you information about the station's preferred length and form and its deadlines.
- Send your PSAs to stations in an attractive package; the outside label should include the title of the spot, your name, the dates it should be aired, the running times and format (i.e., for television, film or video tape; for radio, prerecorded disc, audiotape, cassette or script).

## Free Print Ads

- Contact editors of Sunday television supplements and daily television columns. Ask to have the debate listed as a feature event.
- If your debate is airing on a public broadcast station, try to get a story or announcement in its subscriber newsletter.
- Find out if any local newspapers offer free ad space to nonprofit organizations.

## Free Listings

- Submit announcements to newspapers and broadcast stations for their regularly scheduled Calendar of Events or Community Bulletin Board.
- Find out deadline and preferred length and form.

## News Coverage

- Your debate is news. Keep the media informed about the progress of your debate from the initial announcement to the final evaluation.
- Put together a press kit. Include a "backgrounder," a packet of basic information about your debate (goals, criteria, who, what and when), packaged with a brief updated progress report and any current news releases. Hand out at news conferences and debate events and send in response to inquiries.
- Send (preferably, by fax and mail) news releases, as appropriate, to key media contacts on your list. To ensure coverage of a debate or related special event, follow up with a phone call. Send releases to announce:
  - your decision to sponsor a debate;

- criteria for candidate participation.
- receipt of a large contribution.
- candidates invited to participate.
- broadcast arrangements.
- the debate: date, time, site, format, questioners, major issues.

If you have never written a news release, find out the standard form in a reference book on media relations or in the *League of Women Voters Guide to Getting Good Media Coverage*.

- If you have a major announcement that will provoke questions and result in real news, call a news conference. Send a media advisory (invitation) with just enough information to provoke interest without giving your story away. A news conference starts with a prepared statement followed by questions and answers and lasts about ten minutes. Be prepared to answer questions unrelated to your opening statement or even the debate.
- Try for a feature story. If a newspaper or television newscaster has shown particular interest in the planning or negotiations for your debate, suggest a feature on the upcoming debate.
- If you are having problems with a reluctant candidate or if the debate has become controversial, use the media to get your side on the record. Call editorial page editors or broadcast news directors, request an appointment and send ahead briefing materials and information to support your case.
- Send an op-ed article or letter-to-the-editor to your area's major newspaper.

Tell your story on the air. Try to get invited to local radio and television talk and call-in shows.

### **Debate Coverage**

Many people will view your debate. Even more will learn about what the candidates said in their newspapers or on broadcast news. Make it easy for the media to cover your debate.

Make sure key media know about the debate date and time early enough to clear their calendars.

Set aside space for the media at the debate site. If space is limited, allocate it fairly. Limit the number from each media outlet and issue press credentials on a first-come, first-serve basis.

Make arrangements for still and video cameras.

Arrange for media interviews with the candidates after the debate (if the candidates agree.)

### **Person to Person Promotion**

Get the public interested in the debate through special events such as asking for debate questions, student debates, essay contests or voter participation drives. Put debate notices in the newsletters of other groups, in church bulletins and corporate and union publications. Make it easy and attractive for your own members to come to the debate and bring guests.

## **Chapter 8**

# THE PRODUCTION: SITES, SETS, AUDIENCES AND LAST-MINUTE DETAILS

### **Site Selection and Review**

Choosing a debate site involves both symbolism and logistics. The site sends a message about the goals and tone of the debate. It must meet the candidates' and the broadcaster's requirements. Choose a site that is convenient for your members and for an audience (if any), that has the necessary facilities and conforms to your budget.

### **Location**

Debates should be held in the jurisdiction covered by the election. For elections that cover large geographical areas, such as for governor or senator, the debate should be held in a central location, in the capital city or where the sponsor or the broadcaster is based. If others also are sponsoring debates for the same electoral contest, you may want to consider another major city for your debate. Candidates may vie to hold debates in places where they have the most supporters. If possible, avoid holding a statewide debate in a candidate's home town.

The choice of location can affect the issues that will be discussed; for example, farm policy will come up in a rural area, trade issues in a port city, urban issues and economic development in a city center.

### **Auditorium or Broadcasting Studio?**

Whether you hold your debate in a public or university auditorium or in a broadcast studio depends on the broadcaster's requirements, the candidates' preferences and the sponsor's wishes. Studio debates tend to be more convenient and less costly and to have better technical facilities and security. The broadcaster is more likely to foot the bill for the set and the technical facilities. Some disadvantages of a studio debate include:

- No space for a large audience.
- A tendency for the broadcaster to treat the debate like any other program and take over control of decisions.
- A staff that is responsive to the broadcaster but not to the sponsor.
- Less access for other media, especially competing broadcasters.

If you decide on a studio debate, work with your broadcaster to resolve these problems. Clarify division of responsibility for making decisions. Ask for facilities for the press and others to view the debate in a press room or viewing room. Use signs or your logo to make your organization's role visually apparent on the set and on the screen.

A debate in an auditorium with a large audience makes for a livelier program with more visual variety and interest. An audience serves as a symbol of the candidates' accountability to the voters. The site can take on more symbolic overtones if the debate is held in an historic building, for example, or a restored theater in the inner city or even at a suburban shopping mall.

## **Evaluating a Site**

Some considerations in choosing a debate site include the following:

**Cost** Will a cosponsor or donor provide a site as an in-kind contribution? What charges are involved (rent, maintenance, staff, security, parking, stage set-up, electricity, phone hook-ups, and television cables)? Insist on a written contract that includes all charges so there will be no surprises.

**Accessibility** Is the site convenient for the expected audience and the media? Is it accessible for the physically disabled? Is there sufficient parking? Public transportation? Can television equipment be brought in? Is the site available at least 12 hours before the debate so broadcasters and set builders can set up?

**Broadcast Suitability** Are adequate equipment and services available (lighting, power, house sound, satellite capacity, uplink and downlink capacity, etc.) or can they be brought in? Are there wide enough aisles for television cameras? Is there adequate air conditioning to compensate for the heat of television lights? Will noise from traffic, airplanes, construction, etc. interfere with broadcasting? Is the ceiling high enough for lights? Go over the technical attributes of the site with your broadcasters. Keep in mind the needs of other broadcasters that are covering

the debate. Know in advance the cost of making the site suitable for broadcasting.

**Staging** Is there a stage that will accommodate your set, or can one be constructed? Will the site supply podiums, chairs, stools, etc.?

**Security** Is the location secure (in an area where demonstrations or other disruptions are unlikely)? Can all entrances be monitored or safely secured? Are any potentially disruptive activities occurring at the site or nearby (athletic events, labor disputes/picketing, construction, political rallies)? Can demonstrators outside the site be heard or seen from inside? Can they block access? Will the site provide security guards as needed? Is there an additional charge?

**Insurance** Who is responsible for liability insurance? Is there an additional charge? (A hotel or convention center probably carries its own insurance; a university or library might want to add a "rider" to an existing policy to cover the debate.)

**Audience** What is the seating capacity of the hall (about 500 - 1,000 is best for a statewide debate, for example)? Can the audience see around the television cameras.

**Media Coverage** Is the site convenient and accessible to media? Are there sufficient telephone lines? A press room with desks, telephones and television monitors? Is there a good location for still photographers?

**Other Facilities** Are there holding rooms for candidates; holding rooms for moderator and/or panelists; make-up facilities; space for refreshments (for volunteers, participants and media representatives)?



## Advance Work: Checking Out the Site

There is no substitute for a personal inspection of a debate site before it is selected. No description or diagram can give you the feel or the atmosphere of a site. No floor plan can assure that the ceilings are high enough or that the audience can see the stage despite the television cameras. Bring a checklist to the inspection visit, and have a clear idea of what are essential requirements and what are just added conveniences. Go over your checklist with your broadcaster and bring someone with the necessary technical expertise with you. Try to visit the site at the same time of day that the debate will be held in order to check on traffic, parking and noise.

Once the site has been selected, go over all the arrangements, in detail, with the responsible person on the staff of the selected site. Insist on a written contract that spells out all costs and facilities provided.

A week before the event, review all the arrangements with the site staff once again. Include all your requirements, such as the time that various participants — broadcaster, set builder, debate staff, volunteers, etc. — must have access. Note what services must be provided by in-house technical, security or maintenance staff. Determine what signs are needed to direct the public and the media (both inside and outside the site) and where they should be placed. Make any necessary parking arrangements, designating space for the disabled, television vans, candidates and their staff and debate staff.

Walk through the site, from the main entrance to the auditorium, the backstage area, press and holding rooms. Determine what route candidates should take to get to the holding rooms and the backstage area without

encountering the press or the audience before the debate.

As you go through each of the rooms you will be using, go over the equipment that should be in that room, who will provide it, when it will be needed and when the room must be available.

You can adapt the following checklist to your needs:

### Sample Checklist

#### Debate Room

Open 6 - 8 hours before the debate; need access to room at least 12 hours before the debate.

1. Air conditioning. Set at 60 degrees to compensate for television lights.
2. Location of electrical outlets.
3. Location of house phone.
4. Nearest restrooms and public telephones.
5. In-house sound system; sound technician.
6. In-house lighting system; electricians and/or lighting technician.
7. Placement of security personnel.
8. "No Smoking," "Exit" and other signs.
9. Room Set-up

**On stage:** height and width of stage or platform backdrop podiums, chairs and tables microphones for candidates, moderator/panelists and others water pitchers (no ice), glasses, napkins.

**Media platforms:** for still photos and

television cameras.

**Mult box:** a sound system with multiple outlets.

**Seating:** theater style with wide aisles, marked reserved seats for candidates' staff and family, debates staff, broadcast staff, timers, VIPs, news reporters.

**Location of television cameras.**

**Television monitors:** if site is very large and/or audience visibility is limited.

**Note:** If you are taking questions from the audience, you will need: cards and pencils for submitting questions, seating for volunteers who collect or screen questions, wide aisles and floor microphones if members of the audience are asking their own questions and a way to get questioners to the mikes with as little disruption as possible.

### **Lobby or Foyer**

Open for staff 6 - 8 hours before debate; for public one and a half hours before debate:

1. Direction signs to auditorium, press table and press room, restrooms, coatroom and telephones.
2. Table for debate information, check-in.
3. Media table, for sign-in, credentials check and distribution of press kits.
4. Table with information about your organization.
5. Locations for ushers.
6. Sign for auditorium doors ("Doors will close promptly at 8:45 p.m. Guests are asked not to enter or leave the auditorium until the debate is over.").
7. Television monitors — if needed for debates staff and volunteers who must remain in lobby.

### **Press Room**

1. Tables or desks and chairs to accommodate credentialed media.
2. Phones (one for every five reporters).
3. Water, coffee, soft drinks.
4. Television monitor with video recorder (to allow the debate to be replayed as stories are being written).
5. Plain white paper, pencils.
6. Additional press kits.
7. Media advisory notices on the availability of candidates or debate staff after the debate.

**Note:** The press room or the room used for post-debate news conferences should have a microphone for the speaker and enough seating for observers and candidates' staff. It should be able to accommodate television news cameras.

### **Holding Rooms**

Have separate rooms for each candidate. The holding rooms provide space for candidates to relax and prepare for the debate in privacy and quiet. If the rooms are not suitable for applying make-up, a separate room can be equipped for this purpose and used by each candidate in turn. If possible, also set aside a room for the moderator/panelists to use before and after the debate.

### **Special Services**

**Security** The need for security will vary, depending on the amount of controversy surrounding the candidates, the campaign and the issues expected to emerge. You will have a pretty good idea beforehand whether to

expect problems. You may need the assistance of the local police to handle crowds, traffic or parking. Alert the police if you expect an unusually large crowd, if problems are anticipated or if any threats or rumors of disruption have been received. Work out an understanding with security guards and/or police on careful handling of nondisruptive demonstrators and candidates who were excluded from participation in the debate.

**Photography** You may want to make arrangements for your own photographer to cover the debate event for your records, for evaluation, and for newsletters, annual reports or reports to funders.

**Transcripts and Tapes** Make advance arrangements if you need transcripts for immediate release after the debate. If you want a transcript for your own record or to give to funders or candidates, you can have them made from video or audio tape recordings. Make arrangements with your broadcaster for professional taping of the debate, especially if it is needed for a delayed broadcast.

**Facilities for People with Disabilities** Make arrangements with your broadcaster to have the debate close-captioned for the deaf. If there are problems, check with local or state Councils for the Handicapped. If you are using a large auditorium, check for accessibility and use a sign-language interpreter off-camera for the deaf in the auditorium even if you are using close-captioning for the viewing audience.

**Special Audiences** Consider providing taped translations of the debate in languages other than English for radio broadcast and community centers.

## Debate Sets

### Considerations

Depending on the format and tone of the debate, sets may range from the formality of podiums to the coziness of a living room. Factors to consider in designing a set include:

**Production Values** How the set looks and works on television. The set should look good and give the debate a professional appearance, but should not draw attention away from the debate itself. It should permit flexible, effective use of the television cameras and lights.

**Impartiality** The set should not give any candidate an advantage over another in terms of height, relationship to the moderator or audience, lighting or general appearance. If there are several candidates lined up on the stage, an impartial system of determining their order should be used (by lot, alphabet, etc.).

**Candidate Comfort** Do what you can to make the candidates comfortable and help them relax. Provide stools behind podiums, comfortable furniture and water (no ice; rattling ice is picked up by microphones). Try to minimize physical differences. Provide step-stools for short candidates and avoid oversize easy chairs. Have the candidates check out the set while adjustments are still possible to prevent any last-minute crises.

**Communication** Design the set so that candidates are addressing the audience — both on-site and viewing — and not the panel or moderator. If your format encourages candidate interaction, they should be able to see and address one another.

**Ease of Moderating** Make it easy for the moderator to pay attention to each of the candidates during a cross-talk sequence

without looking like a spectator at a tennis match.

**Conflict Management** The placement of candidates in relation to each other can either promote or moderate conflict. For example, candidates sitting next to one another will be more likely to have a discussion, while those standing opposite one another behind podiums might have a confrontation.

## Designing the Set

Consider the broadcaster's, the candidates' and the audience's needs and preferences in the design of your debate set. The set that is best for television is not always best for an on-site audience. If you must make compromises, opt in favor of the much larger viewing audience. You can always improve the view of the on-site audience through stage risers, banked seats or, as a last resort, well-placed television monitors.

Don't neglect your own visibility. Your organization should be identified visually as an important part of the debate. Use a banner on the backdrop, signs on the fronts of podiums or some other means of identifying your organization as the debate sponsor.

Your broadcaster is the expert on adapting the set to the number and location of television cameras. If you can have only one or two cameras, plan your set so everyone on stage can be on camera at the same time. Discuss camera angles with your broadcaster. For example, do you want shots of the entire set to orient the viewing audience, frequent close-ups, or two candidates on screen together (for a cross talk segment)? Do you want only the candidate who is speaking to appear on the screen, or reaction shots of other candidates? Will there be shots of the audience, and how will that affect the layout of the auditorium and the seating (for

example, you will want to avoid showing a front row packed with supporters of one candidate, or with students—the shot should reflect the diversity of the audience).

If your site has a large stage, you don't have to use all of it, especially if you have only two or three candidates. It is better to have the candidates relatively close together. Use platforms, backdrops, screens, plants or curtains to section off a portion of the stage. Keep the backdrop neutral, but not too dark. Blue is often used. There should be a good contrast between the backdrop and the skin and hair color of the participants. A curtain is fine, but keep it fairly plain — no patterns, tassels or wrinkles. Keep furniture unobtrusive. If you are adding flags or potted plants, consider how they will look on a television screen. Don't leave the viewing audience wondering about that brass pole in the corner, because the flag it holds is off-screen, or being distracted by the palm tree that seems to be growing out of the moderator's head.

Investigate innovative settings, especially when you are using nontraditional sites or formats. Consider using an arena-type theater, for example, or a legislative chamber. For a broadcast studio debate, get your inspiration from existing television talk shows and public affairs programs — a table with the moderator at one end, the candidates lined up on either side (*Washington Week in Review*), a cluster of chairs, informally arranged around the moderator (*This Week with David Brinkley*), an amphitheater with a mobile moderator (*Oprah Winfrey Show*). Some of these settings help solve the problem of multicandidate debates by avoiding the “chorus line” effect of a row of candidates lined up in front of a curtain.

If at all possible, check out the set before the debate, using stand-ins. Find out how things

feel — can the candidates see the time keepers and their warning cards, can they reach their water pitchers, does the lighting work? This can be done immediately before the debate (you can test the lighting and the house sound at the same time). Even better, film the set with participants or stand-ins in place and review the tapes. A few minor adjustments before the last minute may make an enormous difference.

## Audience

If you decide to have a large on-site audience, begin compiling an invitation list as soon as the debate site is chosen and the capacity of the hall is known. If you have the space, by all means invite the public and promote attendance. Distributing tickets or restricting attendance to the invited is a time-consuming process. However, you need to have some idea of the probable attendance and whether your hall will be embarrassingly empty or overflowing. You also want to make it difficult for a group to pack the hall with vocal supporters of a candidate or an issue position.

Although a debate is a service to the public and not generally used as a fundraiser, a small fee to cover some of your expenses and to motivate ticket-holders to attend is not unreasonable. If you have a “hit” on your hands, and expect an overwhelming response, work out some way to distribute tickets ahead of time. Your organization’s leaders and anyone who worked on the debate should receive tickets. Cosponsors, candidates and broadcasters should be offered a limited number of tickets to distribute.

Send out announcements or invitations with order forms enclosed. State, either on the ticket itself or on a separate page, when the doors will open and close and include audience instructions (e.g., no exit or entry during the debate, no partisan identification,

no cameras, no applause, no obvious audience reactions to candidates, etc.). If you plan to have the invited audience check in or pick up tickets at the site, make sure you have volunteer assistance and space for waiting in lines. Specify, in the invitation, when registration begins or when tickets can be picked up.

You will need ushers to check tickets, seat the audience, and control the doors while the debate is in progress. Rope off any seats reserved for funders, candidates’ staff and guests, and other VIPs. Plan to make these seats available to others if they are not filled by the time the doors close. You can make the ushers’ jobs easier by color-coding tickets for reserved seats.

For most debates, printed programs are used more for keepsakes than as aids for following the event. They provide a way to acknowledge funders and volunteers. Don’t include information about the candidates in the program (except what office they are seeking and the most basic biographical information) without clearing the text with the candidates and giving each candidate an equal opportunity to submit copy.

## Volunteers at the Site

With good training and oversight, volunteers can make a big difference in the success and ease of putting on a debate. Ask for volunteers to staff the information and press desks, collect tickets or check in the audience, act as escorts and greeters for candidates and other VIPs, usher, hand out programs, collect questions and evaluation forms from the audience, monitor the doors and act as timekeepers.

Ask each volunteer to fill out a questionnaire that includes times available, any special requirements (e.g., must have a seated job,

needs transportation) and to rank several preferences from a list of tasks. Distinguish long-term tasks from one-shot deals. Assign alternates to some essential jobs, or designate “floaters” to take over as needed, but make sure that each volunteer has something significant to do and will be busy for most of the time on-duty. Let volunteers know that they will be reimbursed for such out-of-pocket expenses as parking, mileage, transportation, dependent care, etc.

## **Last-Minute Briefings and Checklists**

In the last few days before the debate, set aside time to meet with the principal participants in the debate, and go over arrangements in detail one last time while changes and adjustments are still possible. If you have access to the debate site, combine this briefing with a walk-through of the site and a run-through of the format.

At minimum, send each major participant a debate schedule and specific instructions. Enclose a copy of any contracts, groundrules or written agreements. Follow the mailing with a phone call to answer questions and make sure there are no misunderstandings.

**Broadcaster** The major broadcaster should have an opportunity to take a last-minute look at the site, set design and technical facilities. Staff needs to know when they can get into the site for equipment set up and the location of entrances and exits. If you are using a structured format, provide a minutes/seconds timetable — a detailed schedule of the debates program.

**News Media** Either send a news advisory to your media contacts or arrange to have a news briefing at the debate site. Provide the news media with minutes/seconds breakdowns of the format. Specify and explain guidelines

and restrictions on the use of still and video cameras. Provide “backgrounders” that include any new last-minute decisions. Announce any pre- or post-debate opportunities to meet with candidate or other debate participants. Also, announce the availability of transcripts, videotapes or copies of the candidates’ closing remarks.

**Volunteers** If possible, arrange time for orientation and a site walk-through. At a minimum, make sure someone is on hand to answer questions and adjust job assignments as needed. Provide volunteers with:

- Name tags.
- Tickets or credentials for entry to the site.
- Locations and costs of parking; public transportation schedules.
- Exact times to report, where and to whom.
- Written instructions for task, time on duty.
- Detailed debate schedule.
- Clothing guidelines (e.g., no noisy jewelry in the debate room, standard identifying colors for ushers, comfortable shoes, etc.).
- List of names, address and phone numbers of debate staff and other volunteers (for car-pooling, etc.) and substitutes.
- Phone numbers for emergencies.
- Eating places or other facilities near the debate site.
- Expense vouchers and instructions for use.

**Timekeepers** Timekeepers are a special category of volunteers. In recent debates, technology has replaced the traditional bells,

whistles and cue cards and changed the role of the timekeeper. Work with your broadcaster on unobtrusive ways of alerting candidates to their time limits, such as lights on podiums out of sight of the audience.

If you do use volunteers, make sure they are well briefed and have some time to practice. Timekeepers should sit in on briefings with other debate participants. They should have copies of the groundrules and agreements with candidates and broadcasters, in addition to a minute/seconds debate schedule. The timekeepers should discuss methods and signals with the moderator, and jointly decide how to adjust the timing in case of unexpected follow-up questions, answers that do not take up the allotted time and other contingencies.

**Moderators and/or Panelists** Plan to meet with the moderator/panelists at a last-minute briefing no earlier than the day before the debate. Review the format for the last time and hand out the schedule and the issues to be covered, along with any changes in

groundrules or arrangements. Allow time for an abbreviated run-through of the debate segments and a rehearsal of introductory remarks, explanations of rules, etc. Panel members should decide the order in which they will ask questions. At this meeting, moderators, panel members, and the debate sponsor can discuss last-minute campaign issues, potential follow-up questions and anticipated problems.

**Candidates** Arrange a brief session, on site, with the candidates or their stand-ins to check the podiums, chairs, stools or other furniture, the positioning of the other candidates, the moderator, panelists and timekeepers. Check out any signals the candidates must see. Use this opportunity for the broadcaster and house staff to do last-minute checks on light and sound. Review groundrules and timing for the last time. Brief the candidates on arrangements for still photographs and news conferences. This is the time for the draw or coin toss that determines the order in which the candidates speak.

## Chapter 9

# EVALUATION AND OTHER FOLLOW-UP

Once the debate is over, it is tempting to celebrate and then relax. But there are some follow-up tasks still to be done. Your evaluation and reports of the debate project will help your organization get the most out of the debate experience and provide a foundation for future debates.

## Following Up

### Thank Those Who Helped

Consider a reception immediately after the debate (and any news conference) to share the credit for the accomplishment of a valuable and exciting public service. Invite all the participants and contributors. Volunteers and funders should get special attention, such as public recognition, a special party or certificates of appreciation.

Later, thank debate participants, volunteers and funders in writing and make sure they receive reports of the debate. A transcript, video or audio tape of the debate makes a nice remembrance. Or, present them with a kit of debate publications and materials or an album of debate photographs. You may be going to some of these same people for debate participation or assistance in the future, so establish a good long-term relationship.

### Create a Record

It will help future efforts if you collect and record as much as possible about the debate project. Arrange to have debate-related newspaper articles clipped and keep track of coverage in news weeklies or magazine. Videotape post-debate analyses and broadcast

news coverage and try to capture radio coverage, talk show comments and radio interviews on audiotape.

### Collect Materials

Keep copies of all debate materials — agreements, contracts, publications, timing schedules, tickets, programs, press clippings, tapes, photos, etc. — that can be used as examples or prototypes for future debates. Your records on political debates may be of historic or academic interest. Consult with an appropriate library, university or archival institution. Don't pass on sensitive data about individuals or negotiations unless you can be assured that confidentiality will be protected.

## Evaluating the Debate

The groundwork for evaluating your debate is laid during the planning process. As you identify debate goals, determine ways to measure progress toward those goals. Use several evaluation mechanisms, such as:

**Questionnaires** Ask everyone who worked on or participated in the debate to respond to a questionnaire about their experience and make suggestions for improvement. Distribute evaluation questionnaires to the on-site audience.

**Interviews** Schedule interviews with the principal participants and, if possible, representative members of the live and broadcast audience to get several perspectives on what worked and what could be improved.

**Polling** Get the results of any polling or focus groups conducted by the media. If you have



the resources, commission a survey or add questions on debate viewing or reactions to the debate to an existing public opinion poll. Try to determine the demographic profile and voting intentions as well as the size of the debate audience. Measure public awareness of the debate as well as public opinion about it.

**Ratings** Consult your broadcaster for help in measuring the debate audience; or allocate funds for a rating service.

**Review of Debate Tapes** Invite people involved in the debate and outside experts (broadcast producers, journalists, academic specialists in political science or communications, etc.) to view tapes of the debate and provide constructive criticism. Use a standard questionnaire with room for comments.

**Promotion Review** Collect and evaluate all news articles, video and audio tapes of debate promotion and coverage. Estimate the size of the audience reached by promotion. Review the media strategy and suggest changes for future promotion efforts.

## Reporting the Results

The results of the evaluation process will form the basis for a Final Report on the debate. This official report should include goals, plans, implementation techniques, results, evaluation and suggestions for the future. Other useful reports include:

**Financial Report** A complete report of the actual income and expenditures along with the original budget, with explanations of any major changes or adjustments.

**Summary Report** For distribution to the news media, candidates, broadcasters, etc. Includes the debate goals and how they were met, a brief chronology and an evaluation of the debate as a public service. Use photos to illustrate debate activities.

**Report to Funders** Large funders, such as foundations, will let you know what their reporting requirements are. At a minimum, send funders a Summary Report and a Financial Report.

# CONCLUSION

The League of Women Voters has learned that practice and experience in sponsoring and producing debates leads to debates that are better, easier and more informative for the public.

A debate is a learning experience for the sponsor and the community. Candidates feel less at risk and, with experience, begin to see debates as opportunities and challenges more than risks. Candidates and broadcasters grow more willing to try new approaches and formats. Funders gain increasing appreciation

for the audience appeal, visibility and public service provided by candidate debates.

Most important, the voters come to expect candidate debates as an essential part of all major election campaigns. Citizens look to political debates for the information they need to make decisions on candidates and issues. Debate sponsors, broadcasters and candidates are making democracy work when they produce and participate in election-related debates.

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©1996 League of Women Voters Education Fund  
1730 M Street, NW • Washington, DC 20036  
Phone: 202.429.1965

Funded with a grant from the Ford Foundation.