

Creating Candidate Forums, Questionnaires, and Voter Guides

Educating voters about the position of every candidate on a diverse set of issues is an important community service. NCJW's 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status requires us to plan candidate forums and craft candidate questionnaires and voter guides carefully. The information below can help you undertake this important voter education effort consistent with rules governing a tax-exempt non-profit.

▶ **Planning Candidate Forums**

Candidate forums provide an excellent opportunity for constituents to hear the views of candidates running for office. For the candidate, such events provide a chance to address the concerns of the community in a fair and open setting. Holding a forum shows the candidates that community members care about the issues and want to be informed voters. It also demonstrates NCJW's commitment to election issues and educating voters. Candidate forums should be viewed as a great opportunity to: work with other 501(c)(3) organizations, raise your section's profile with the media, recruit new members, keep current members engaged, and help inform voters.

Do:

- ▶ Invite all viable candidates for an office. Even if all are invited, there is a risk that the event could appear partisan if some candidates refuse to participate. **If only one candidate agrees to attend, you should cancel the forum.**
- ▶ Pick an accessible and neutral location — the location must not be selected for political reasons. It should be accessible to people with disabilities and, when possible, to public transportation.
- ▶ Use an independent moderator so that the rules of the forum don't favor any one candidate over another.
- ▶ Compile a list of fair questions. Questions must address a broad range of issues and should not suggest the response the forum sponsor prefers. Questions should not be selected to show particular candidates in a better or worse light. (This doesn't mean they can't be controversial, but it does mean you should ensure your questions are broad and unbiased.)

Don't:

- ▶ Don't invite only the candidates with whom you agree.
- ▶ Don't select a location designed to intimidate a particular candidate.
- ▶ Don't indicate support for or opposition to a particular candidate or party.
- ▶ Don't use the forum as a political fundraiser or allow others to do so.
- ▶ Don't give any indication of NCJW's views on issues so as not to prejudice the forum. This means that NCJW materials distributed or displayed should not give the organization's position on issues raised in the forum.

▶ **Crafting Candidate Questionnaires**

Like the candidates forum, the questionnaire is a valuable tool to educate and inform voters about the views of those running for office. A questionnaire, which must cover a broad range of issues that candidates would address if elected, provides an opportunity for all candidates to make their positions known.

Do:

- ▶ Invite all candidates, regardless of party affiliation, to complete the questionnaire.
- ▶ Include a deadline for completion of the questionnaire, maximum word count for answers, information about where candidates should send responses, and an explanation of how the questionnaire will be used (e.g. printed in a local newspaper, online, in an NCJW section bulletin, posted on Facebook, etc.).
- ▶ Verify that all candidates have received the questionnaire and provide a reasonable amount of time for them to respond.
- ▶ Compile a list of neutral, unbiased questions on a variety of issues. NCJW resolutions are a useful tool in selecting the broad range of issues that your questionnaire will address.
- ▶ Print answers in their entirety unless they exceed the previously established word limit.
- ▶ List all candidates and indicate if they did not respond to the questionnaire or to a particular question.

Don't:

- ▶ Don't include only the candidates or parties with whom you agree.
- ▶ Don't write biased questions that reflect approval or disapproval of a particular candidate's position or give a hint as to NCJW's bias.
- ▶ Don't highlight any one question or the response of any one candidate.
- ▶ Don't ask only yes or no questions without allowing for an explanation.
- ▶ Don't compare candidates' positions to NCJW's positions on the issues or state NCJW's position anywhere where the questionnaire will be published.

▶ **Writing an Informative Voter Guide**

A voter guide is a voter education tool that offers “one-stop-shopping” for information about each candidate's positions on the issues. By compiling voting histories, responses from a candidate questionnaire, and candidate position statements, the voter guide is a great way to educate the public and makes it easy for voters to compare candidates' positions.

Do:

- ▶ Include all viable candidates' positions, regardless of party affiliation.
- ▶ Cover a broad range of issues that the candidates would address if elected.
- ▶ Describe the issues using unbiased, neutral language that does not hint at NCJW's positions.
- ▶ Use only positions that are in the candidates' own words in response to a question or are described in a neutral, unbiased, and complete manner.

Don't:

- ▶ Don't include only the candidates with whom you agree.
- ▶ Don't highlight only a narrow set of issues.
- ▶ Don't use biased language to describe the issues or the candidates' responses.
- ▶ Don't edit candidates' statements.
- ▶ Don't compare candidates' positions to NCJW's views on the issues or put NCJW's positions anywhere in the guide.