

GUIDELINES TO DEVELOPING A CANDIDATE PARTICIPATION POLICY

Before your League undertakes the responsibility of sponsoring a debate or candidate forum, it is important that your board determine the criteria under which candidates will be invited to participate. This will help your League avoid the appearance of favoritism or partisanship. Your participation policy should be tailored to the needs of your League and your community, keeping in mind state and federal election laws.

Here are some guidelines to consider:

- 1) Your board should adopt a candidate participation policy before contacting any candidates about participating in your debate.
- 2) You may want to adopt different criteria for candidates for different public offices (congressional races for which there may be public opinion polls, for example, as opposed to state and local races for which polls are usually not conducted). You may also want different criteria for primary and for general election debates.
- 3) Your policy should equip you to deal with the unexpected: for example, the emergence of a last minute write-in candidate or a third party or independent candidate.
- 4) In determining eligibility under the criteria, it is the candidate's, not the League's, responsibility to demonstrate that all criteria have been met.
- 5) Your candidate participation policy should be given to all candidates when the first contact is made or the invitation is given. Copies of the policy should also be given to the news media when your League first announces its intention to hold a debate.
- 6) Never discuss a candidate's participation in a debate until the person you are talking with has been given a copy of the policy.
- 7) Always apply the criteria consistently.
- 8) Do not allow your policy to be subject to negotiations with either the candidate, the candidate's staff, or the news media.

Developing a Candidate Participation Policy

Ideally your board will adopt a candidate participation policy before knowing who the actual candidates will be. This means that your policy must anticipate the unexpected. The simplest policy, and the one that will be most inclusive, is one that allows all "eligible" candidates to participate, including write-in and independent candidates.

The state League candidate participation policy for the general election typically has a "voter interest" criterion that can be demonstrated by a major party nomination or by receipt of a certain percentage support in a nonpartisan public opinion poll. Local League debates, on the other hand, typically cover races for which there are no public opinion polls. Congressional races are often an exception, however, and your League should determine whether your policy is to include all candidates and whether your policy will be the same for both a primary debate (when many candidates are unknown to the voters) and a general election debate (when you will have major party nominees).

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Points to include/examples for a local League Candidate Participation Policy:

Statement of purpose

Candidate forums sponsored by the League of Women Voters of Sunny Acres are held to provide a forum for thoughtful discussion of the important issues before the voters [*to be more exclusive, add:* by candidates who have demonstrated significant voter interest and may therefore be elected.] The League seeks to stimulate voter interest and participation with these events.

Criteria

A candidate may participate if he/she meets the following criteria:

Constitutional Eligibility - The candidate must meet the requirements of the Illinois and United States Constitutions.

State Election Laws - The candidate must meet all requirements to be on the ballot according to state election law.

Or more inclusive

The candidate must meet all requirements to be on the ballot according to state election law or must have filed a notarized declaration of intent to be a write-in candidate at least [10] days prior to the debate.

Formal Campaign - The candidate must show evidence that a formal campaign is being waged. (*This could be as simple as a candidate having made a public announcement of his/her intention to run. The extent of a formal campaign will vary with the level of the office being sought—define what you mean. A candidate for congressional office should probably have a campaign headquarters, campaign staff, position papers and campaign appearances. A candidate for school board may have only an informal committee.*)

more exclusive

Voter Interest - The candidate must demonstrate significant voter interest and support as evidenced by a major party nomination or receipt of [10%] support in a nonpartisan public opinion poll conducted at least [14] days but not more than [40] days prior to the debate. (*Set a reasonable percentage to show evidence of support, keeping in mind the probable number of candidates. Set a cut-off date so there will be sufficient time to make final debate plans.*)