

EMPTY CHAIR DEBATES: POLICY FOR STATE AND FEDERAL ELECTIONS RECOMMENDED GUIDELINES FOR LOCAL ELECTIONS

POLICY FOR FEDERAL ELECTIONS

League-sponsored debates or forums for candidates vying for a federal office (U.S. Senator, U.S. Representative) must include at least two candidates for that office. Neither the State nor local Leagues may hold a scheduled debate when only one candidate for an office accepts or appears for an event. Local Leagues are reminded that LWVIL take the initiative for scheduling forums for U.S. Senator.

Rationale:

The Federal Election Commission (FEC) enforces limits on contributions made on behalf of federal candidates. The FEC rules apply only to candidates for federal office but affect both 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) organizations.

Providing a debate or forum that does not include at least two candidates for federal office is considered to be a contribution of “something of value” and thus subject to the FEC limitations.

POLICY FOR STATE ELECTIONS

League-sponsored debates or forums for candidates vying for a state office (State Senator, State Representative, and statewide offices: Governor, Lt. Governor, Attorney General, Secretary of State, Treasurer and Comptroller) must include at least two candidates for that office. Local Leagues are reminded that LWVIL takes the initiative for scheduling forums for statewide offices.

In the case of an uncontested race, the single candidate may be invited to participate in a public education event. Leagues are strongly encouraged to consider alternatives to the traditional forum.

Under no circumstances may a single-candidate debate or forum be sponsored under the auspices of the LWVIL Education Fund. This means that local League Education Fund monies cannot be used for such an event in accordance with both FEC and IRS regulations.

Rationale for Common Policy on Candidate Forums for Federal and State Elections:

Since these races often involve more than one local League, a continuity of policy will help avoid confusion for the Leagues, the public, and the candidates.

Rationale for Not Holding Single Candidate Forums (Empty-Chair Debates):

League members sometimes feel that one candidate is not playing fair with the other by his/her refusal to appear, but it is not the League’s purpose to resolve such political conflicts. A candidate in a contested race, who appears alone, has the distinct advantage of presenting partisan views and comments without challenge. The League should never be in a position where its nonpartisanship is questioned.

(OVER)

RECOMMENDED GUIDELINES FOR LOCAL ELECTIONS

For county, township or local elections (municipal, school board, etc.), LWVIL recommends that the same policy as higher offices be used. **If your League decides a different policy would better serve the interests of voters in your community, that policy should specify in writing:**

- the purpose for holding the candidate forum,
- the ground rules that will govern it including a statement on substitutes or stand-ins for candidates unable to attend, and
- **the procedure that will be followed if only one candidate chooses to or is able to appear.****

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Suggested options **if only one candidate accepts or appears for the event** include:

- (1) Candidate who is present gives a brief statement (2 minutes); **no questions from the audience are permitted.** Provide time and space for the candidate to talk informally with interested persons **at the conclusion of the event.**
- (2) Adjourn the forum **without giving the single candidate an opportunity to make a statement,** indicating that the League's nonpartisan status is jeopardized if **only one candidate is given a platform.** Provide time and space for the candidate present to talk informally with interested persons attending.

Appreciation is extended to the League of Women Voters of Minnesota Education Fund for use of some materials from their publication, *Candidate Forum Guidelines* (1998). Acknowledgement is also made to the League of Women Voters Education Fund publication, *Face to Face* – Chapter 2 (1996).