



[www.ucc.org/ourfaithourvote](http://www.ucc.org/ourfaithourvote)

## Organize a Candidate Forum

Many people do not vote because they don't feel connected to the candidates or issues at stake in an election. Holding candidate forums helps open up the communication between candidates and their constituents and gets people interested in an election. What better place than your church to hold an open dialogue?

Candidates for public office may be invited to speak at your church in their capacity as a candidate or as an individual. Candidate forums and debates held by UCC churches can help improve and redirect the public, political dialogue that has become increasingly shallow and mean-spirited. We have the ability to set the tone of the debate and demand a higher standard of discourse.

### Planning Your Candidate Forum or Debate

Have your Our Faith Our Vote committee pick a time and date to invite candidates to a forum or debate. You might want to find out if other churches in your community are interested in working together to set up and publicize the event. You will be more likely to get candidates to attend a forum if it is sponsored by numerous churches and/or groups in your community.

#### *Invite the candidates*

Send an invitation letter to the candidates well before the planned event and follow up with a phone call. It may take some time to find a date that will work for the schedules of the candidates in a race. Be flexible.

#### *Plan the format*

There are many ways to set up a candidate forum. Here are some of the common formats you can choose from:

- allow the candidates to give prepared remarks and have people ask follow-up questions from microphones in the audience;
- have prepared questions to ask the candidates on themes important to your church and community;
- pass out index cards to the audience to write questions on and pass them in to be read.

Leave enough time at the end for the candidates to give closing statements. Give candidates the same amount of time to make their closing remarks. Make sure to have your moderator thank the candidates for their attendance and to remind people of voting day and encourage them to get out and vote.

#### *Publicize the event*

Include brief notices in the newsletters of churches, campus groups, community-based organizations, and other groups related to the ministry of your UCC church. Ask radio stations to run public service announcements. Ask to be listed in calendars of events in the local newspapers. Display posters in places frequented

*“Shout out, do  
not hold back!*

*Lift up your  
voice like a  
trumpet!”*

– Isaiah 58:1



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by your target audience. Ask your minister to announce the event during church service. Ask the mission, social action or men's and women's groups at your church to help get the word out. Make sure to invite the youth group and get them involved in planning the forum or debate.

### *Inform the Press*

Invite the local newspaper and TV stations to cover your candidate forum or debate. This is a great way to get coverage of the issues out to a broader audience. It also gives us a chance to show that UCC churches are engaged in the political process. Check the UCC's Our Faith Our Vote website [[www.ucc.org/ourfaithourvote](http://www.ucc.org/ourfaithourvote)] to get details on writing a press release and doing effective media outreach.

## Keep Your Event Nonpartisan

Please remember the following when organizing your candidate debate or forum:

- Questions for the candidates should be prepared and presented by an independent nonpartisan committee or individuals;
- Topics discussed by the candidates should cover a broad range of issues that the candidate would address if elected to the office sought;
- Each candidate must be given an equal opportunity to present his or her views on the issues discussed;
- Do not ask candidates to agree or disagree with positions, agendas, platforms, or statements of your church or organization; and
- Make sure the moderator does not imply approval or disapproval of the candidates.

## Further Guidelines for Candidate Appearances at Your Church

*Appearing at Separate Events* - You are not required to have all candidates speak on the same Sunday, or at the same event. However, you must provide equal access to other candidates in the same race. It is permissible to invite them to speak on successive Sundays as part of the regular worship service or organize evening forums. Inviting one candidate to speak at a traditionally well-attended event while inviting another to speak at a normally sparsely attended event is not providing an equal opportunity. *And no campaigning or fundraising should take place.*

*Limiting the number of candidates* - If the number of candidates for a particular office is too large to be practical during a forum or debate, your church may limit the number of invitees provided that you adopt and consistently apply reasonable and objective criteria for deciding between candidates. For example, you may invite the candidates from the two major political parties and a number of other candidates who have attained a predetermined proportion of popular support based on a credible, independent poll.

*Speaking as a Non-Candidate* - Sometimes candidates who are public figures or are experts in a particular field outside of their candidacy are invited to appear at church-sponsored worship and functions (as they may be a member of your church). They are welcome to come and may be acknowledged just as any visiting dignitary might be provided that they are not invited to use the occasion as a platform for their candidacy and do not mention the election or the candidacy.

If you invite political candidates to speak in a non-candidate capacity, you are not required to provide equal access to all political candidates.