

A BRIEF GUIDE TO ORGANIZING A CANDIDATES DEBATE

BY JUDITH SHANE ©

HAMPTON IONA COMMUNITY GROUP

OTTAWA, ONTARIO

MARCH 2018

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Use this active guide to assist you in laying out the logistics, timing and tasks necessary to plan a Candidates or All Candidates Debate. Whether you are organizing a debate at the municipal, provincial or federal level, this guide will provide you with the major fundamentals.

The “Timelines And Possible Actions” section pairs tasks and steps with the correspondent timing required to systematically move ahead.

The “Tips And Suggestions” section provides more specific commentary and explanations regarding key decision areas.

This guide is neither meant to be comprehensive or fully inclusive. Rather it provides a basic framework to assist you in your planning and operations. You may well have additional and more original ideas better suited to your group’s individual needs.

There are different models and ways to organize a Candidates Debate. Please use the suggestions and frameworks provided in this Guide to assist you in planning and customizing the event that works best for you.

FOR FURTHER ASSISTANCE

Judith Shane has been involved in organizing a number of All Candidates Debates, on behalf of her local community association, at the municipal, provincial and federal levels. She can be contacted at:

judith@lacconsulting.ca

TIMELINES AND POSSIBLE ACTIONS

FIRST STEPS: ASSESSMENT

- Evaluate whether your own debate will cultivate interest and draw a crowd.
- Assess whether your group has the financial and personnel resources to organize a debate.
- Research whether likeminded groups are also planning a debate. Consider how co-partnering and/or co-sponsoring might reduce costs and workloads.
- Identify and contact possible venues regarding room rental quotes and date availability. Tentatively reserve several dates.
- Contact sound equipment rental businesses for quotes on sound systems (if applicable).
- Begin drafting a budget.

EARLY ON: PRIORITY PLANNING

- Set the budget. Determine how to finance the debate.
- Decide whether all candidates will be invited or only those from certain parties.
- Invite the candidates. Determine their availability. Ask them to reserve several dates.
- Narrow down the date until you have one where everyone involved can attend (weeknights tend to draw larger crowds than weekends).
- Set the date. Confirm in writing with everyone involved.
- Book the venue. Sign the room/hall contract.
- Ask for the name of someone in each campaign to be your contact person.
- Choose and invite the moderator.
- Book the sound system and technician (if applicable).

MIDWAY

- Design an electronic/paper flyer.
- Get started on publicizing the debate.
- Recruit volunteers for:

- Timekeeping
 - Set-up/clean-up
 - Refreshments table
 - General assistance
 - Distributing/posting paper flyers in public places (and removing them later)
- Decide whether refreshments (if any) will be donated or bought. Self-serve or by volunteers.
 - Decide on the debate format including: rules, time limits, rebuttals, opening and closing statements, codes of conduct for candidates and campaigns. Consult with moderator.
 - Determine how questions from the audience will be handled (spontaneously from the floor, pre-selected, etc.). Consult with moderator.
 - Send identical, finalized copies of the format and rules to each candidate.
 - Consider whether to live stream the debate.

THE DAY BEFORE

- Confirm with the candidates whether they have read the debate rules and will comply.
- Confirm with the candidates that they intend to attend (cancellations do happen).
- Confirm there are sufficient microphones ordered for all participants.
- Confirm volunteers understand their roles. Have back-up volunteers in case of cancellations.
- Confirm refreshments have been bought/ordered.
- Visit the venue to design a floor plan (if necessary).
- Ask a group leader to prepare a brief opening speech (introducing the moderator and candidates).
- Make place cards for all candidates and the moderator.

ON THE DAY: LAST MINUTE

- Conduct a sound check, including all microphones. Allow plenty of advance time for set-up.
- Ensure all electrical wiring is taped down (to prevent slips and falls).
- Place signage at entrances to room and building indicating location of debate.

- Place a volunteer(s) at the front entrance to greet candidates and to show campaign volunteers to the tables provided for their literature display.
- Place water glasses and water pitchers where easily reachable by candidates and the moderator.
- Have a contingency plan to deal with crowd overflow and standing room only space. Ensure fire exits remain unblocked and room does not exceed capacity permitted.
- Have moderator briefly review format and rules with candidates. Introduce timekeeper and ensure candidates, moderator and sound technician have an unobstructed view of her/him.

AFTERWARDS

- Thoroughly clean up the venue.
 - Return rented/loaned sound equipment.
 - Return refreshment equipment (urns, water jugs, glasses, etc)
 - Thank moderator and volunteers.
 - Publicize the archived live stream of debate (if any).
 - Pay bills.
 - Review and assess what might be improved upon for the next debate.
-

TIPS AND SUGGESTIONS

FINANCING THE DEBATE: WHEN FUNDS ARE LIMITED

- Co-sponsor the debate with likeminded groups
- Ask a coffee shop to donate the coffee, urns and supplies
- Supply the beverages yourself; make cookies. Charge a minimal amount for each.
- “Pass the hat” to solicit donations from the audience.
- Rent a venue not requiring your group to purchase liability insurance (if you don’t have it already).
- Rent a venue which subsidizes rentals for non-profit groups (schools, some religious buildings, etc). Or find a free space.

CHOOSING A VENUE

- Somewhere within relatively easy travelling distance for your membership.
- Close to a transit line.
- Has fully accessible entrances and washrooms.
- A place for bicycles to be safely parked and locked.
- Ample parking lot and/or street parking.
- A room/hall sufficiently large to hold the anticipated capacity without having to turn away people or break the fire regulations.
- Access to a kitchen if you are making coffee, tea, etc. on the premises.
- Where liability insurance is not required if your group does not already have it.
- Check if the venue has specific rules regarding bringing in outside food, signage, etc.

DEBATE FORMAT AND GENERAL RULES

Some items to consider including in your format:

- Organizing group opens with general remarks, introduction of moderator and candidates.
- Moderator's brief review of format and rules.
- Candidates' opening statements.
- Questions from organizing group(s).
- Questions from moderator.
- Questions from the audience (spontaneous or pre-selected questions; directed at all, some or just one candidate).
- Rebuttals by one or more candidates.
- Follow-up questions.
- Candidates' closing statements.
- Concluding remarks by organizing group.

Be aware: the more candidates participating in the debate, the less time available for answers and statements.

Other related suggestions:

- Send to all candidates a document containing the format and rules. Send several days in advance of the debate to allow time for campaigns to ask questions or for clarifications.
- Ask the candidates or their campaigns for email confirmation that the document has been received and reviewed and, that candidates will comply.

- Candidates/campaigns may want to hang campaign signs in the room or outside and to directly hand out material to the audience. If this is not your preference, consider the following alternative:
 - Provide each campaign with its own table (or half table) at the back or sides of the room.
 - Allow campaign volunteers to stand/sit at the table, chat and hand out campaign materials to audience members who approach the table.
 - Other interest groups or co-organizing groups may also be provided with tables if you so choose.

PUBLICITY POSSIBILITIES

- Design a flyer (electronic/paper) containing the relevant information: place, time, address, organizing group's name, co-sponsors, contact person, etc.
- Ask volunteers to flyer public places where there is pedestrian and bicycle traffic (and take down flyers after the debate).
- Get the word out to people who do not have computers.
- Send electronic flyers to some or all the following:
 - candidates' campaigns
 - local city councillors
 - community calendars in local city and community newspapers
 - radio and television stations
 - your group's website; other groups who may be interested; related social media sites; do email alerts
- Write a brief article in your local community newspaper.
- Consider live streaming the debate and archiving it to your website.

ROLE OF THE MODERATOR

A moderator can play various roles:

- Be passive or assertive
- Ask questions
- Maintain order, explain and enforce time limits and rules
- Keep audience questions concise
- Use humour to defuse tension and combative interactions
- Prevent cross-talk, over talking or interruptions

- Maintain balance and fairness
- Invite spontaneous, lively debate and rebuttals

Selecting a moderator with previous experience in these roles can be a great asset towards producing a successful event.

ROLE OF THE TIMEKEEPER

- Times and counts down candidates' statements and answers to questions.
- Uses an electronic timer with a bell/buzzer to indicate time limit reached.
- Uses select items to indicate time countdown (e.g. poster boards, coloured papers, ping pong paddles, coloured lights)
- Countdown colours:
 - Green – time starting, begin talking
 - Orange – caution, little time remaining
 - Red – time over, stop talking
- The timekeeper must be situated/seated where the candidates, moderator and sound technician can clearly see her/him.

SOUND SYSTEM

- Consider using a sound system when:
 - Acoustics are poor.
 - The room/hall is large.
 - Speakers are soft-spoken.
 - Outside noise may interfere.
 - To prevent cross-talk.
 - To prevent candidates exceeding their time limit.
 - For groups without sound systems or unable to borrow them, there are companies that rent out the equipment and technicians.
 - There are a variety of options including:
 - Table microphones for each candidate
 - Sharing of one or more microphones between some or all candidates (challenging with more than a few candidates)
 - Separate table microphone or clip-on for moderator
 - A microphone on a stand for the audience (audience members queue up behind the stand to ask their questions)
-