

# Handbook for Moderators of Candidates Nights

You have agreed to be the moderator of a candidates night and you're nervous. You can imagine shouting matches, fist fights in the aisles, and a total breakdown of decorum, followed by gleeful reports in the newspapers next day of your failure to maintain order. Relax. It won't be quite that bad, and this booklet should help you to make the preparations, both physical and mental, that will keep you the one on top.

It will be helpful for you to bear in mind the following:

- A candidates forum is a human institution and as such is imperfect. Being political makes it even more so.
- Who is better suited to do the job properly than the League of Women Voters? And how can the League do it without hardy souls like you?
- Careful preparation is the best insurance against the unexpected (and there usually *is* something that you didn't quite expect).
- A sense of humor is often your best weapon in dealing with the swirling political passions of the moment.
- If you need reassurance, you can lean on the voters service chair, who can also refer you to other League voters service pros.

## The Moderator's Job

The moderator presides, referees, restrains, and exercises a *moderating* influence over the proceedings. She or he has the authority to call the meeting to order, recognize speakers, call people out of order, banish them from the hall, call a recess, adjust the ground rules to meet unexpected circumstances, and even to adjourn the meeting if things are petering out or have gotten out of control.

We strongly advise that, before serving as a moderator, you serve as a timekeeper or question sorter, or take some opportunity to watch other moderators in action.

## Preparations for the Candidates Night

1. You should have received from the organizing committee a description of the office or ballot measure and a copy of the letter of confirmation sent to the candidates or participants. During the week preceding the event, get in touch with the coordinator of the event to go over the arrangements in detail. Find out which candidates aren't coming or haven't answered. Practice the pronunciation of unfamiliar names. Determine whether any unusual circumstances exist, and satisfy yourself that you agree on the procedure. Inquire about directions, parking, and other nuts-and-bolts details.

2. Prepare a script or script outline (*see sample on pages 5-6*) with time estimates. The standard format has seven sections:

- Welcome and introduction of the program, including details of the office or ballot measure
- Introduction of candidates/participants
- Explanation of the ground rules
- Round one - opening statements
- Round two - answers to audience questions

- Round three - closing statements
- Thank-you to the sponsors & audience; reminder to vote.

While this may be the standard format, it is by no means the only one. Planners should feel free to vary the format and experiment with new ones that are appropriate to the circumstances.

3. Prepare for the question period with a system for varying the order in which candidates speak or answer. You will want to vary not only who speaks first or last, but also who follows whom. One technique is to prepare small cards, one for each participant, that you can rearrange after each round of questioning. Another is to prepare a grid. (*see sample on page 7.*)

It is also a good idea to **have some questions of your own** up your sleeve to get the ball rolling or to fill awkward pauses, bearing in mind, of course, that your questions should be untainted by any biases you may have. The organizing committee can assist you in this.

4. Prepare **lots** for candidates to draw to determine the order for opening statements. A simple approach is to write numbers on pieces of paper that you hold and place in a paper bag or arrange in a fan in your hand. The order for closing statements is usually the reverse of the opening statements.

## The Event

1. Arrive about thirty minutes early. If everything is going well, you won't have anything to do, but if a snafu has occurred, you'll be grateful for the extra time.

2. Check with the event coordinator on these details:

- the seating arrangements: You will be best situated if you can see all of the candidates.
- the microphones (*test them!*): it is a good idea for you to have access to a microphone at all times; it helps you to maintain authority.
- water pitchers and glasses
- the location of the timekeeper
- the location of TV equipment
- the presence of ushers with **cards** and pencils
- tables for campaign materials outside the hall, after the meeting
- Evidence of favoritism: posters, banners, fliers.

3. Meet the person who will introduce you, and clear up last minute details.

4. Fifteen minutes before starting time, call the candidates together to go quickly over the ground rules, master difficult pronunciations, and draw lots for the starting order.

5. Five minutes before starting time, gently herd the candidates into their seats. Starting on time will be easier if they are settled.

6. Give a last-minute check around the hall for campaign paraphernalia posters, banners, signs, fliers-and ask that they be removed. (At some candidates nights campaign brochures and other materials are allowed, but not inside the hall and not **until after** the meeting has adjourned.)

7. Gather your composure around you and start. You will want to set a certain tone, a seriousness of purpose tempered with good humor. You want the audience to recognize that you will be firm and fair. Look alert and aware, but don't let your face reveal any feelings you may have about the candidates or the issues. Move quickly and decisively against disturbances. If the atmosphere is very tense, a light-hearted comment can help to ease the strain.

## WHAT IF

### **...a candidate keeps going when his/her time is up?.**

Interrupt gently, but firmly. "Excuse me, Mr. Candidate, but you have used up your time." You can let people finish their sentences, but some people's sentences never end. If you permit one candidate to go over his or her time, the others will never let you forget it.

### **...a candidate gets obstreperous?**

Address him or her directly. "Ms. Candidate, you are out of order." "Dr. Candidate, I must remind you once again that you are not being fair to the other candidates." If your admonitions don't work, console yourself with the thought that the evening is accomplishing its purpose: *Revealing the candidate's true character!*

### **...a member of the audience is rowdy?**

Address him/her directly. "Sir, please sit down and wait your turn." or "Please respect the rules we have established so that we may have an orderly discussion of the issues." Usually, your comments and growing peer pressure from the audience will do the trick. If it doesn't, call a brief recess and speak to the rabble rouser yourself. (There have even been occasions, fortunately rare, when a member of the audience was drunk and disorderly and the police had to be summoned.)

### **...the audience becomes unruly?**

Remind the audience that this is not a rally for voters who have already made up their minds, but a nonpartisan meeting for those who have not. You can use such comments as: "We understand that many of you have strong feelings about this election [issue], but others have come tonight to help them decide how to vote. Please let us use all our time for discussion of the issues." or "Please, let's not waste time that should be spent discussing the issues."

Remember that you have the authority to call a recess to review the ground rules with the cosponsors and participants. You even have the authority to decide that the *conditions just* do not exist for a useful discussion of the issues and so adjourn the meeting.

### **...there is a challenge to your authority and. the way you are conducting the meeting?**

Calmly restate the ground rules and proceed (You may even read from the letter of invitation.) If the challenge continues, you may call a recess and caucus with the candidates and sponsors. With careful preparations, this shouldn't happen.

### **...you're not sure which questions to ask?**

You can use several criteria. You will want to cover the main issues thoroughly, cover a variety of issues, permit tough questions while excluding scurrilous ones. You will also want to avoid the appearance of censoring the questions because you disapprove of them .

**...a "question" to a candidate is really a personal attack?**

Rule the question out of order, explaining that we are here for an open, orderly exchange on the issues, not character assassination. Ask for another question .

**...a "question" is really a statement?**

Interrupt. "Please phrase your statement as a question." Some moderators time the *questions* as well as the answers .

**...all the questions are on the same subject?**

Ask the audience for questions on other topics. "We have had many questions on this topic. Are there any members of the audience who wish to question the candidates about other issues?"

When the questions are submitted in writing, you and the question sorter can consolidate some of them: "Here we have three questions on the same topic." Better not try to rephrase questions, though. Questioners have great pride of authorship.

**...the audience is very small?**

Consider rearranging chairs in a more informal setting and perhaps adopting a more conversational format. Give the candidates more time to answer questions.

**...you run out of questions?**

Adjourn. Sometimes the audience is small or the race lacks hot issues. Just move ahead to the closing statements and send the grateful audience home.

**...people demand to take the written questions with them afterwards?**

Refuse them. Its best to have the, moderator dispose of the written questions. People may ask to look at them after the forum to satisfy themselves that the League has not been acting as a censor of legitimate questions

## **Sample Script for Moderators**

### **1. (7:30)\* Call to Order (The sponsor may do this and introduce the moderator.)**

- a. Introduce the timekeeper, who will signal candidates with colored signs marked ONE MINUTE, 30 SECONDS, and STOP, and the question sorter, who will screen questions into topics, trying to avoid duplication and personal attacks. (Sometimes the question sorter will ask the questions, to reduce distractions for the moderator and preserve the moderator's aura of impartiality.)
- b. Introduce the office: length of term, number of vacancies, salary, any special circumstances, etc.
- c. Introduce the candidates in the order they are seated, noting which are incumbents.

### **2. Explanation of the ground rules**

- a. Opening remarks, question period, closing remarks

- b. Point out the ushers and encourage people to obtain cards on which to write questions before the question period begins. Ask them to write or print legibly (they won't, but ask anyway).
- c. Close with a general ground rule about audience behavior, for example: "Since the candidates night is designed to provide a nonpartisan setting for undecided voters to hear all positions, any demonstrations of support or opposition to the candidates or their positions will be out of order. At the end of the evening we will thank all of the candidates with our applause."
- d. "We will aim for a [9:30] adjournment."

### **3. (7:40) Opening Statements**

"Now let's begin with our first candidate."

### **4. Question Period**

"Now it's time for the candidates to answer your questions."

### **5. (9:10) End of Question Period**

"So that we can adjourn on time, I think we'd better make this next question the last one."

### **6. (9:20)\* Closing Statements**

"Now the candidates will make closing statements. We will reverse the order that we began with."

### **7. (9:30) Adjournment**

"On behalf of the [*sponsoring* group(s)] and the League of Women Voters I want to thank the candidates for running and for coming here this evening. Thanks to [timekeeper] and [question sorter] and thank you for being such an attentive audience and for asking such good questions. REMEMBER TO VOTE ON [date and encourage your family, friends, and neighbors to vote also."]

*\* The times given are examples, only. You will need to do a little light math to estimate at what time to start your adjournment countdown, based on the number of candidates/debaters. And if audience interest seems very high and there are important subjects that have not been covered, you may want to consider adding fifteen minutes or so. Some moderators even ask the audience for a show of hands on such an extension.*

## SAMPLE GRID

*A grid like this can help to provide a fair rotation of questions and answers at forums, particularly those that have many candidates. Using it you can vary who answers first and last and also who precedes or follows whom.*

	<b>question 1</b>	<b>question 2</b>	<b>question 3</b>	<b>question 4</b>	<b>question 5</b>
Candidate A	1	6	4	8	2
Candidate B	2	8	3	9	4
Candidate C	3	5	8	7	1
Candidate D	4	7	1	6	5
Candidate E	5	2	9	3	8
Candidate F	6	4	7	2	9
Candidate G	7	9	2	5	3
Candidate H	8	1	6	4	7
Candidate I	9	3	5	1	6
and so forth					