

Your Guide to Hosting an All-Candidates Meeting

As we near an election—whether federal, provincial, municipal or a nomination race—interested organizations will host all-candidates meetings for people to meet the candidates and dissect their platforms. While we encourage people to attend these all-candidates meetings, most of these meetings will focus on “mainstream” issues rather than the issues that are of greatest concern to Christians. These critical issues can be highlighted by an all-candidates meeting hosted by a local church or ARPA chapter. Below, we provide some general principles and a step-by-step guide for hosting an all-candidates meeting.

General Principles

- Be non-partisan; invite all candidates, provide each candidate the same length of time to speak, and encourage questions aimed at all the candidates. This non-partisanship is necessary for both churches as well as ARPA chapters; churches must remain non-partisan to maintain their charitable status, and ARPA Canada, as a non-partisan organization, requires its chapters to be non-partisan as well.
 - Communicate with candidates early and often; work with candidates to settle on a date that works for the majority of candidates; inform the candidates of the meeting format and relay any predetermined questions to the candidates in advance so they can adequately prepare responses.
 - All-candidates meetings have two purposes: to let voters know where candidates stand on the issues and to allow voters and candidates to interact; balance the time devoted to direct candidate-voter interaction (such as questions from the audience and socializing time after the meeting) with enough predetermined questions and candidate remarks that cover a wide range of issues.
-

Steps to Hosting an All-Candidates Meeting

Book a Time and Venue

- Decide who is your target audience for the event. Reformed Christians will generally be the primary targeted audience but consider inviting like-minded churches and organizations and the general public. The broader the invitation for the event, the more likely candidates will consider attending.
- Examine Reformed church and community calendars to find dates that minimally disrupt existing events; this will help maximize attendance from the Reformed community
- Consult with the candidates and set a date and time for the event; this will help maximize the number of candidates in attendance
- Choose a venue with a convenient location and adequate capacity for the anticipated attendees

Select the Format

All-candidates meetings typically have 4 main sections: opening remarks, a question and answer period, closing remarks, and socializing time.

- Determine how much total time to devote to each segment of the meeting. (We suggest about 15 minutes for opening remarks, 60 minutes for questions and answers, 10 minutes for closing remarks, and an open-ended time for socializing.)

- Determine the amount of time each candidate may speak, both for their remarks and when answering questions. This will depend on the number of candidates in attendance and the number of questions asked. (For instance, for a meeting with 4 candidates and 8 questions during the Q&A segment, you might give each candidate 4 minutes for opening remarks, 1 minute 30 seconds to answer questions, and 2 minutes and 30 seconds for closing remarks.)
- Determine whether questions will be predetermined and asked by the moderator, ad hoc and asked by voters, or a mixture of both; in either case, give each candidate equal time to respond to each question. These predetermined questions are an excellent way to bring up issues that are unlikely to be covered in the more mainstream all-candidates meetings and debates.

Select the Moderator and Timekeeper

- Select one or two people to act as moderator and/or timekeeper. The moderator is responsible for opening/closing with prayer, setting meeting rules, introducing the candidates, asking any predetermined questions, moderating questions from voters, and enforcing speaking time allocations. The timekeeper is responsible for monitoring speaking times (a tablet with the running time for the candidates is useful) and indicating when the speaking time is up (a bell is handy for this).

Advertise the Meeting

- Advertise to your target audience well in advance (at least two weeks before the event) through church bulletins, email lists, and social media. Ensure that you include the time, date and venue but, if possible, try to also outline the general format of the meeting and name the candidates attending.
- Decide and inform the candidates what they may bring or do at the all-candidates meeting (e.g. can they hand out brochures, distribute lawn signs, solicit donations, or sign up party members?)

Host the Meeting

- Arrive well in advance with a team of volunteers to set up tables, chairs, podiums and microphones. Affix a sign identifying the candidates' names and parties in front of their podium or chair; ensure that this is visible throughout the room. Provide water for the candidates.
- Have the moderator open with prayer and outline the format of the meeting. Then set and enforce ground rules for the meeting: request that all candidates and voters engage in respectful dialogue, remind candidates and voters not to engage in tirades or personal attacks, and respectfully but firmly interrupt candidates or voters asking a question if they are speaking past their allocated time.
- Encourage people to socialize, ask individual questions, and network with the candidates after the meeting. Providing coffee and/or refreshments is a good strategy to encourage people to socialize.

Follow-up After the Meeting

- Encourage voters to volunteer, donate, and vote for candidates who shared a vision that they support
- A day or two after the event, call or email each candidate to thank them for their participation
- After the election, either congratulate candidates on their success or thank them for running for office
- Use your relationship with the winning candidate to highlight Christian issues throughout their term

If you need any additional advice or want to share the news of a successful event, we would love to hear from you at info@arpacanada.ca.