

A Guide to Organising an Election Forum

An excellent way to engage your church and local community in the electoral process, and to learn more about your local candidates, is to organise an election forum. An election forum is a community event where all candidates in a particular electorate are invited to express their values and vision, articulate their policy positions on a range of issues and answer questions from the audience—their potential constituents.

What would an election forum look like?

The first thing is to be clear about why you want to hold the event. Are you hoping to provide an opportunity for your congregation and members of the community to be better informed about the candidates, their priorities for office and their policies? Or is there one significant issue in your electorate that deserves a substantial conversation between the candidates and the voters?

If your forum is going to be issue-specific, remember that it must be an issue that comes within the federal jurisdiction e.g. climate change or taxation reform, or one where the federal parliament can have significant influence through the delivery of funding e.g. family violence.

A common way of structuring an election forum, broad ranging or issue-specific, is to invite candidates to address the audience for a few minutes each, followed by an open question and answer forum. Alternatively you can have a very orderly forum where each pre-determined question is asked and each candidate has a set time to respond. You'll find more detailed suggested format for a forum at the end of this guide.

Getting started

It's not easy to try to organise an event like this on your own. Gather a group of people who would like to be involved in planning and holding an election forum to form an organising group or committee—and don't forget to consult with your church council and leaders. Depending on how large your congregation is, you might like to co-organise the event with another like-minded group in your community. There might also be other congregations within your electorate that are interested in co-hosting an event.

Some congregations may find that their members come from more than one Federal electorate, and you might need to organise more than one event. You could make a decision to only run a forum for one of the electorates, perhaps the one where most of your church members live, or the electorate that is of most significance to your congregation.

Start by deciding whether you'll have a general forum or one focused on a single issue. Then it's a good idea to develop an event plan with a timeline, being clear about individual tasks and deadlines

Setting a date and making the invitations

The Federal Government has set Saturday 18 May 2019 as the date for the election. You should start planning your event now—candidates often get booked up very quickly around the time of the election.

Members of the organising group should call the offices of the sitting MP and other candidates, as early as possible with a few prospective dates, and be a bit flexible. Be prepared to give information about the structure of the event, how many people you hope to attract, and why you have decided to hold the event.

It's important to be clear, honest and open about what you have planned. Remember—candidates are more likely to respond positively if they know the event will be well organised and that they will have a good opportunity to interact with the voters in their electorate. It is very important to invite all candidates in your electorate and ensure that your communication with them is respectful and without a hint of any personal political preferences you and the other organisers might hold.

To ensure your forum is nonpartisan, consider inviting all the candidates who are seeking to represent the electorate you're hosting your event in.

The ABC's *Australia Votes* website usually lists all the candidates for each electorate.

Information gathering

Research your local federal electorate and make sure you are aware of the boundaries, as some of the electorates in Victoria have changed since the last federal election. If you want to be sure which electorate your church is situated in, the Australian Electoral Commission has this information. Do some research on the candidates before the event.

Find out about their policy priorities and the policies of their parties. Identify issues which are gaining attention in your electorate and which are relevant in the context of a federal election. The organising group might also like to do some thinking about how you would want your local member to contribute to the national and international affairs of Australia.

2019 Federal Election Timeline

Thursday 11 April – Election Called

The election has been called and the House of Representatives is now dissolved. While all seats in the House of Representatives will be newly elected, only half of the 72 State Senators will be elected for the Upper House. The new State Senators will commence their term from 1 July 2019.

Thursday 19 April – Close of Roles

The 'close of rolls' is the date the electoral roll closes for the federal election, as set out in the writs. After this date, you cannot enrol or update your details on the electoral roll for the federal election.

Sunday 21 April – Close of Party Nominations

(House of Representatives) Registered political parties may lodge the nomination of all the candidates they are standing in House of Representative seats in a state/territory with the Australian Electoral Officer for that state/territory by this date.

Tuesday 23 April - Close of Candidate Nominations

Close of nominations for both House of Representatives and Senate candidates occurs at exactly midday on the date set out in the writ for close of nominations. Late nominations or changes cannot be accepted.

Monday 29 April – Early Voting Commences

Early voting becomes available for eligible voters. Eligibility criteria are the same as those for postal voting.

Wednesday 15 May – Close of Postal Vote

An application for a postal vote must be received by the AEC no later than 6pm on the Wednesday before election day.

Saturday 18 May – Election Day

Polling will occur in all designated polling places from 8am to 6pm local time. Polling closes at 6pm sharp, however any voters in the queue at that time are able to cast their vote.

Advertising the forum

Think about the opportunities you might have to promote the forum to the community. Local media outlets are always looking for stories about active local people and events. Remember local media comes in many forms—radio, local and community newspapers, websites etc—and that there are usually plenty of places to put up promotional flyers, like public notice boards in supermarkets, community centres and cafes. Once you have a firm commitment from the candidates, you can use all of these avenues to spread the word and raise interest in the community. You may even want to try to get your Moderator to be a known personality to draw additional attention. Don't forget to frame the forum as a community event and to emphasize that it's nonpartisan.

It is a good idea to send a media release out to all local media outlets. Most media outlets have an email address where media releases can be sent. Do a search online to find the contact details for local newspapers and send them the media release before the event and on the day of. There is a sample of a media release at the end of this kit.

Making it work

Elections can be times where feelings run hot as people compete to have their opinions heard. While discussion and questions should be encouraged at your event, it's important that election events are inclusive, safe places for everyone to get involved. Your event should not endorse any one political party, and all candidates must be treated with equal dignity and respect. Similarly, political candidates should treat community members with respect; and while they might bring political material with them, they should only give it out to those who ask. You may need to be very clear about this—that no tables, stalls or banners will be allowed.

Make sure you have a strong neutral moderator for the event —someone who can keep proceedings focused and not become side-tracked by one or two participants or audience members with strong opinions or a tendency to speech-make. It can be tempting to invite a high-profile person to act as forum moderator. While this can help attract people to the forum, it is good chairing, moderating or hosting skills that will be most important for a successful event.

If there is media interest in the event, make sure you arrange a special space for them to sit and observe. Representatives from the media should ask questions either before or after the event.

Each candidate should get equal time to speak and respond to questions. Keep it simple: the whole event should be no more than an hour and a half in length, and tea and coffee at the end are always appreciated, but not necessary.

Participation from the audience should be encouraged, but it's a good idea to prepare two or three questions (the moderator might ask these) to get the discussion started.

Possible questions for candidates

The Assembly document 'Our Vision for a Just Australia' is a great resource to use to help you shape your questions. It expresses the Uniting Church's vision for a just Australia and why our faith calls us to work towards its fulfilment. It's broad enough to include many relevant issues facing Australia today which will allow you to draw from when you shape your questions.

You can download the Uniting Church's Vision Statement at: <https://uniting.church/visionstatement2019/>

Here are some examples of starter questions for your local candidates to encourage thoughtful discussion on a range of issues. Some of these questions require a more in-depth answer than others; you might pick one or two or write your own:

- What would be your vision for a Just Society?
- When confronted with controversial issues (such as asylum seekers or tax reform) what principles would guide your decision-making?
- How do you intend to consult with us as your constituents on important matters of policy reform?
- What principles or values would guide you in considering legislation to ensure action on climate change?
- What principles or values would guide you in considering legislation and policy ensuring justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?
- In what ways can Australia contribute internationally to a just and peaceful world?

Questions:

What if there is a cancelation?

If a candidate cancels at the last minute or doesn't show up, it's ok if you want to continue with the forum. If there were only two candidates, explain what's happened and that by continuing you are not endorsing the remaining candidate. We recommend symbolically leaving an empty chair in the debating space for the absent candidate.

Follow up

After the event, organise for at least one person to follow up with the candidates. Ask for their feedback on what was and was not helpful for them. Plan to keep in touch on specific issues or questions that were raised with the candidate who is elected. Let us know about the forum too. We'd be very happy to hear about your experiences and see photos. Contact us via email at JIM@victas.uca.org.au or call us on **(03) 9340 8800**.

Forum Check List

- ✓ Planning team and roles identified
 - Media and Communications
 - Question Creators
 - Volunteer coordinator
 - Contact person

These roles can be combined
- ✓ Set time, date and place for the forum
- ✓ Invite all of the candidates
- ✓ Advertise your event and send media releases
- ✓ Forum format confirmed
- ✓ Forum space planned
- ✓ Equipment organised
 - Microphones
 - Podium
 - Seating for candidates (casual or formal?)
 - Seating for audience
 - Water jugs and glasses
 - Signs for time keeper to keep candidates on track ("1 minute left", "30 seconds left")
- ✓ Organise volunteers:
 - Moderator
 - Time Keeper
 - Contact or point person for the Candidates to laise with
 - Set up and pack up team
 - Hospitality team
 - People to collect questions from the audience
or to walk microphones around
 - Photographer
- ✓ Parking for the Candidates
- ✓ Name plates for the Candidates
- ✓ Pre-written questions
- ✓ Gift for the Moderator

Suggested Sample Media Release

FairyLand Uniting Church
123 Prospect Rd, Vic
042222222

MEDIA RELEASE

April 28th, 2019

FAIRY LAND UNITING CHURCH HOSTS CANDIDATES FORUM

Today, candidates in the Fairy Tale electorate have been invited to a public forum where they will be questioned on their policy ideas on issues ranging from climate change to asylum seekers. Questions have been researched and developed by local community members and will be asked to all candidates tonight at 7pm.

Please arrive by 6:45 for a timely start. The forum will finish promptly at 8:30pm. Please contact Jane Surname for more details and to confirm press attendance, 04222202.

Suggested Format for Election Forum

90 minutes total

Time in minutes	Description	Role
5	WELCOME: Moderator welcomes everyone, updates everyone on venue issues such as where the toilet and exits are, and introduces candidates	Moderator
3 x (number of candidates)	OPENING STATEMENT: Each candidate is given 3 minutes to address everyone as an opening statement	Candidates
1	QUESTIONS: Q1 read by moderator (or by question readers)	Moderator
2 x (number of candidates)	ANSWERS: Each candidate has 2 minutes to answer question - time keepers have signs to give them warnings - moderator tells them when they are done	Candidates Time Keepers
9 (if there are 4 candidates) x (number of questions)	Continue questions and responses In a 90 minute forum, there will only be time for 5 or 6 questions total if you have 4 candidates answering at 2 minutes each.	Candidates Time Keepers
2 x (number of candidates)	CLOSING STATEMENT: closing statement from each candidate, two minutes	Candidates
10	OPTIONAL: Open the floor to questions from the audience *Please note that if you do this, we highly recommend you have one volunteer holding the microphone, and another volunteer screen questions before they get up to the microphone. Screen questions for the following, and if the answer is yes, then don't let this question be asked: - is it a more relevant to a State or Local Government issue? - is it rude or inflammatory? - is it a comment rather than a question?	Microphone holder Question Screener Audience
3	CLOSING: Thank you and closing statement from moderator	Moderator

This paper was based on the UnitingJustice resource: A Flourishing Society: Your Faith, Your Voice, Your Vote in response to the 2016 Australian Federal election. Amended and distributed by Denisse Sandoval and Tim Molineux for the Justice and International Mission Cluster of the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania.