Virtual Candidate Forum
Toolkit

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Purpose

The purpose of this toolkit is to provide an overview of how to provide opportunities for communities to engage with candidates for elected offices through hosting candidate forums, during an election season that includes social distancing.

The toolkit provides information for hosting virtual candidate forums for upcoming school board and municipal elections by featuring: the purpose of a virtual candidate forum, overview of how to organize and facilitate a virtual candidate forum, election information, and sample invitation letters. This should serve as a guide for coordinating virtual candidate forums for the 2020 election cycle.

In the midst of this current national emergency, we must be creative to ensure that the civic rights of people are not compromised. So far, the June primary has been moved to July 7th and the school board elections have been moved to May 12th. In light of these Election Day changes, it is imperative to educate voters and encourage turnout for local elections.

Why Host a Candidate Forum?

The goal of candidate forums is to educate your community on candidates' positions on important social justice issues that are important to your communities. In some cases, your forum might be the only time a candidate addresses certain issues. This helps educate voters on candidates' positions while also raising the profile of these issues in the community. Even in these difficult times, it is important to find ways for people to hold candidates accountable.

Important Note About May 12 Elections:

In light of the COVID-19 public health crisis, on March 19, 2020, Governor Murphy signed Executive Order 105. This Order postponed all elections remaining in March 2020 and in April 2020 to May 12, 2020. As such, on May 12, 2020, 32 municipalities throughout the state (list provided below) will hold school board, nonpartisan municipal, and/or special elections. All elections taking place on May 12, 2020, shall be conducted solely via vote-by-mail ballots, which will be sent to all registered voters without the need for an application. Postage will be prepaid. There will be no polling places for the May 12, 2020 election. The voter registration deadline for the May 12 elections will be April 21, 2020. This is extremely important to share with your network.

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Who Will be Having Elections on May 12?

Municipality	County	Type of Election
Newark	Essex	School Board [1]
Irvington	Essex	School Board and Municipal [2]
Orange	Essex	Municipal
Belleville	Essex	Municipal
Nutley	Essex	Municipal
Montclair	Essex	Municipal
North Bergen	Hudson	School Board
Weehawken	Hudson	School Board
West New York	Hudson	School Board
New Brunswick	Middlesex	School Board
Old Bridge	Middlesex	Special (Fire District 1)
Passaic	Passaic	School Board
Paterson	Passaic	Municipal
Totowa	Passaic	School Board
Atlantic City	Atlantic	Special (Municipal Referendum)
Ventnor	Atlantic	Municipal

Municipality	County	Type of Election
Cliffside Park	Bergen	School Board
Fairview	Bergen	School Board
Garfield	Bergen	School Board
Hackensack	Bergen	School Board
Oakland	Bergen	School Board
Ridgewood	Bergen	School Board and Municipal
Ridgefield Park	Bergen	Municipal
Teaneck	Bergen	Municipal
Allenhurst	Monmouth	Municipal
Deal	Monmouth	Municipal
Keansburg	Monmouth	Municipal
Loch Arbour	Monmouth	Municipal
Ocean City	Cape May	Municipal
Bass River	Burlington	Municipal
Medford Lakes	Burlington	Municipal
West Amwell	Hunterdon	Special (Township Committee)

[1] Municipalities that are highlighted include hyperlink to resource that list candidates running
[2] Municipalities that are not highlighted did not have online resource listing candidates

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Pros & Cons
to Virtual Candidate Forums

Pros:
- Candidates are able to share their platforms with community members
- Community members are able to engage with and ask important questions to candidates
- Helps with voter engagement and can positively impact turnout as community members become more familiar with candidates

Cons:
- Not every community member will have access to the virtual platform
- Lose the impact of an in-person forum where community members would be able to interact more directly with candidates

Turnout Strategy

- **Frame it as a saving our democracy and voter education event**
- **Leverage partner organizations**
- **Create flyer for social media outreach**
- **Draft an invitation email.**
  - Utilize your or partner organizations' contact lists
- **Make calls inviting community members**
  - Utilize your or partner organizations' contact lists
- **Social media (Facebook, Twitter), email communications, press release**
- **Create an invitation with an RSVP function so you know how many to plan for**
- **Continuously provide updates as it gets closer to the date**
- **Reach out to local media**

Tips
for a Virtual Candidate Forum

- **For a phone virtual candidate forum, create a free account with FreeConferenceCall.com**
  - Share the conference call number in a virtual candidate forum invitation email and via phone outreach
  - Residents will be able to dial in from home
  - Ask people that dial in to mute their phones
  - Provide a 5 minute introduction of the candidates, the position they are seeking, and the importance of the virtual town hall
  - Include an RSVP link in email
  - Record and have someone take minutes of the virtual candidate forum
- **For a videoconference virtual candidate forum, create a free account with Zoom, Google Hangout, or Uber Conference**
  - Utilize a laptop or desktop computer that includes a web camera. After creating an account, review the website's "getting started" information
  - Schedule a video conference meeting and share the link with your list serve
  - Ensure that all candidates have video conference capabilities and have access to the applications
  - Residents will be able to join by utilizing their desktop computers, laptops, or phone
  - Before the candidate forum begins, ask all attendees to mute their microphones
  - For the Q&A session, ask attendees to utilize chat box or submit questions beforehand via email
    - Tips for Q&A session:
      - Have a moderator for the virtual candidate forum that will keep track of time and ensure that the program layout is followed in the right order
      - Have a few prepared questions just in case of minimal responses from attendees
      - Use Chat Box feature if you are utilizing video conference technology like Zoom or GoToMeeting
  - Record videoconference virtual candidate forum and share with listserv at its conclusion
- **Keep it neutral; have an impartial moderator**
- **Allow equal time for candidates' introduction and platform presentation**

Tips for a Virtual Candidate Forum, cont.

- **Things to consider:**
  - A few questions should be prepared (see sample question section), but the majority of the questions should come from attendees that call in
  - Once candidates complete their presentation, the Q&A session should begin
  - Options for Q&A:
    - Have attendees that RSVP submit questions beforehand or give notice that they desire to raise a question
    - Ask attendees to type questions in the chat box. The moderator will present these questions to the candidates
    - Limit each candidate's response to 2-3 minutes per question
- **Consider co-hosting with another organization that aligns with your mission**
- **Assure the candidates that it is non-partisan, as they will tend to avoid forums they think may be partisan**
- **Candidate Outreach:**
  - Make contact with candidates early on to gauge their interest and get their availability before you finalize the date and time
  - Make sure the candidates know who else is invited, the phone conference format, what questions the moderator will be asking or at least the topics, that attendees will be asking questions, and when they need to let you know whether or not they're attending

How to Stay Non-Partisan and Neutral

- **Cover a broad range of issues**
- **Allow each candidate equal time to present their views**
- **Ensure the moderator stays neutral throughout the event**
- **If you are a 501(c)(3), please remember that you cannot appear to endorse any specific candidate. As such, you should reach out to all candidates and offer them the opportunity to participate.**

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Possible Questions
for Candidates of Local Elections

Below are sample questions that can be asked during the virtual candidate forum. In your invitation, encourage participants to submit questions that center on issues that impact their prospective communities.

What are your views on the needs of children in our community and what specific steps would you take to address these needs?

What are your plans to help improve the classroom experience for students and teacher?

How do you plan to assist the students in our school district that currently live in food insecure households?

How do you feel about the transportation options currently available in our city? Do we have enough options? If not, what will you do to increase them?

How do you plan to involve residents in the decision making process in our town?

If you received a $2 million grant to use for the city, what would you do with it and why?

In light of COVID-19, what are your plans to help our city recover from the public health and economic damage caused by the pandemic?

What neighborhood do you live in? Why? Where are your favorite places to spend time in our town?

Which community initiatives or organizations were you involved in prior to running for office?

What more does the city need to do to fund affordable housing?

How will you balance the increasing funding needed for schools with, what many view, are too high property taxes?

What is your position on constructing and/or ensuring more affordable housing options?

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Sample Candidate Invitation
Email

Dear (Candidate's Name):

On behalf of (Organization's name), we would like to invite you to our upcoming virtual candidates forum. This non-partisan forum will provide an opportunity for candidates running for (enter office) to engage with community members. All candidates participating will be able to share their platform and then participate in Q&A with attendees.

(Insert information about your organization's mission, issues you desire to be covered by the candidates, issues that are currently impacting the community.)

Include format for the call:

- Time :
- Free Conference Call Number or Video Conference information:
- 5 minute introduction per candidates
- 2-3 minute response per conference call

(Encourage candidates to share information about the virtual candidate forum on their social media platforms and list serve.)

[If applicable] As a 501(c)3 organization, (organization name) does not support nor oppose candidates.

Please respond to confirm if you will be joining us for this important community event by notifying (me/name, no later than [date].) If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at (phone) or by email at (email address).

Sincerely,

Sample Turnout
Email

Dear (Name),

Please join (organization name) on (date and time) via conference call for an event with candidates running for (name of office). In partnership with (names of partner organizations), we are extending an opportunity for all candidates for (name of office) to introduce themselves to the attendees, share their values and positions, and answer questions about issues of vital importance to our community including (priority issues/main focuses of the event). This virtual candidate forum is extremely important for accountability and to ensure the needs of the community are heard by each candidate seeking office. Accountability and the inclusion of the community perspective are key components of the electoral process.

[Include a note about how attendees will be able to ask questions.]

Include format for the call:

-     Time :
-     Free Conference Call Number or Video Conference Information:
-     5 minute introduction per candidates
-     2-3 minute response per conference call

[If applicable] As a 501(c)3 organization, (organization name) does not support nor oppose candidates.

All candidates for the office are being invited to participate.

Please RSVP by email or clicking this (link). If you have any questions, please reach out (Insert Name/Phone Number).

Sincerely,