

HOW TO ORGANIZE AN ALL-CANDIDATES MEETING

Federal elections are an important time to lobby politicians on the issues that matter to you. Political candidates are likely to make promises and commitments while on the campaign trail, and are often more open to your questions and demands. One of the best ways to find out about candidates, and to get their promises on record during the elections, is to hold an all-candidates meeting in your neighbourhood.

Key decisions when planning a debate

Many Council chapters cover more than one riding. While it would be helpful to hold a candidates' debate in every riding, this is likely not possible. Consider partnering with local community organizations that might already be planning a candidates' meeting, and save your energy for the ridings where there isn't already a meeting taking place. You might want to target a riding where a particular candidate holds a position of power within the current government. You should also consider the following:

- The riding with the largest population
- A riding where there is a "hot" issue – the construction of a P3 hospital, for example
- A "swing riding," where the incumbent candidate faces hefty opposition.

Planning the event

1. **Assemble a team of volunteers.** This can include chapter members, as well as members of partner organizations. When forming an organizing committee, a small group of three to five people works best. But you will also need to recruit people to put up posters, circulate flyers, contact the media, set-up chairs, purchase refreshments, and all sorts of other jobs. If there is a college or a university in your riding, think of ways to get young people involved.
2. **Select a moderator.** This person will be crucial to the success of the meeting. Select a person with known community ties, who knows how to control a crowd. Some examples might include:
 - A local media personality
 - A retired politician
 - A community volunteer.

Make sure that your moderator has a good grasp of the issues, is able to treat candidates fairly, and is able to enforce the procedures for the debate. It is important you ensure that the moderator is not involved in any of the candidates' political campaigns, and is not publicly aligned with any political party.

3. **Contact the candidates.** For an up-to-date list of the candidates running in your riding, consult the Elections Canada website (www.elections.ca). Be sure to follow up telephone

invitations with a letter and confirm the availability of all candidates. Meetings work best when everyone is there.

4. **Find a location.** Community centres, churches, libraries and universities often offer spaces for free (or for low cost). When you book a space, you should consider some of the following features:
 - Access to public transportation
 - Parking
 - Accessibility
 - Acoustics and sound system availability
 - Number of seats.

5. **Draw a crowd.** Here are some techniques:
 - Ask chapter members to invite others. Eighty per cent of volunteers doing community work said they began because a friend, family member, or a neighbour asked them.
 - Drop off flyers and put up posters at meetings of other groups, seniors' homes, community centres, libraries, cafés, and other places where people gather.
 - Knock on doors. Remember to wear a nametag, and encourage people to knock on their neighbours' doors with invitations. Bring lots of copies of pamphlets advertising your event. Never door-knock alone. Always go out in teams of two or three people.
 - Place free public service announcements in community newspapers, and on local radio and television shows. Make sure to check out the deadlines.

6. **Keep track of candidates' promises.** Appoint a secretary, and either record the meeting, or take careful notes. Note any policy positions expressed, or promises made by the candidates present at your meeting. You can use these statements in your future lobbying efforts to hold elected representatives accountable for their positions and voting records.

7. **Remember to thank your volunteers.** Have a party or potluck to celebrate a successful event.

KEEP US IN THE LOOP!

Let us know about the election-related actions you're planning. Contact Jan Malek at 1-800-387-7177, ex. 231, or by e-mail at jmalek@canadians.org.

If you would like to be contacted by the Council of Canadians chapter in your area, please phone Jeannette Muhongayire at 1-800-387-7177, ex. 229, or at jmuhongayire@canadians.org.

For more tips on organizing actions in your neighbourhood, check out *HAction Link: A Guide for Council ActivistsH* at www.canadians.org