

A Guide To Hosting Candidate Forums That Address Voter Priorities

Use the Arizona Voters' Agenda to center the voices of voters in the discussion

Thank you for participating in Arizona's election by hosting a candidate forum. Engaging Arizonans through forums can help increase public understanding of the election process and help voters assess how the candidates running align with their priorities. This handy guide covers some fundamental strategies for a successful forum discussion – one that is fair, informative, and focused on what most voters care about.

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Choose a Discussion Format and Ground Rules: Equal-Time Example

One of the first and most important steps in planning a candidate forum is determining the discussion format and ground rules. While there is more than one format for hosting a forum, the most common is an equal-time question and answer discussion: an impartial moderator(s) questions the candidates, who are allowed equal response time. Critical elements of an equal-time format:

- **Pro-tip:** Communicate the ground rules and provide any clarity needed before you begin.
- Give all candidates equal time. Candidates may answer the same questions or be asked different questions, as long as each is given equal time to present their point of view. Some standard time limits:
 - Two minutes each for introductions
 - Ninety seconds to answer each question
 - Sixty seconds for rebuttal
 - Two minutes each for conclusions or closing statements
- Ensure the order in which candidates respond is fair
- Draw lots to randomly determine the order in which candidates speak for the opening and closing
- Take turns to answer questions – start with a different candidate for each question

Prepare Questions with Voters in Mind

Ask candidates about the issues Arizona voters care about most

Candidates for elected office often focus on talking points that appeal to small groups of reliable voters. This detracts from meaningfully addressing what the majority of the electorate wants to know from candidates as they determine their vote. Outline your questions for the debate or forum in advance, focusing on what voters want to hear about.

What do voters want to hear about from candidates?

Center for the Future of Arizona surveyed likely Arizona voters in the 2022 General Election to determine what the majority want candidates to address as they compete for their votes, which resulted in the Arizona Voters' Agenda. The Arizona Voters' Agenda survey findings point to the priority issue areas for voters and essential questions to ask candidates as they are competing for votes.

Starter List of Questions from the Arizona Voters' Agenda

Pro-tip: When preparing for the debate or forum, first review the survey data at arizonafuture.org/arizonavotersagenda to be able to expand on why these are priorities for voters.



EDUCATION – What is your plan to ensure that Arizona students have quality teachers and principals?

- **FOLLOW-UP:** What should Arizona do to increase teacher pay?
- **FOLLOW-UP:** What should Arizona do to ensure every school has the resources they need to deliver quality education that prepares every child for the future?



ECONOMY & INFLATION – Economists forecast Arizona will have a \$4 billion budget surplus over the next three years. What do you think the state should do with the growing surplus?

- **FOLLOW-UP:** The Arizona Legislature passed a bipartisan budget in June 2022 that included investments of surplus dollars. Do you think additional investments are needed, and what would that look like?
- **FOLLOW-UP:** What should Arizona do to address inflation and rising costs and make housing more affordable?



WATER – What should Arizona do to protect our water future and secure our long-term water supplies?

- **FOLLOW-UP:** The drought has forced a water shortage declaration on Lake Mead. Should Arizona be planning for a future without Colorado River water?
- **FOLLOW-UP:** Is Arizona prepared to handle a water crisis? What more can we do to conserve, regulate, and secure additional water supplies?



ENVIRONMENT – What sustainable practices should continue and be implemented to protect Arizona’s air, land, and water and foster a high quality of life for all?

- **FOLLOW-UP:** What more can be done to preserve and protect Arizona’s rivers, natural areas, and wildlife?
- **FOLLOW-UP:** How will you ensure Arizona makes sustainable gains on environmental concerns affecting everyday lives and economic vitality, such as forest fires and air quality?



ELECTION REFORM – What should Arizona do to keep our elections secure while preventing barriers to participation?

- **FOLLOW-UP:** What can Arizona do to ensure that all candidates, regardless of party affiliation, have the same signature requirements to qualify to run for elected office?
- **FOLLOW-UP:** Do you support early and mail-in voting, and why or why not?



IMMIGRATION – How do you define a functioning border for commerce, and what is your vision for immigration reform?

- **FOLLOW-UP:** How do we create a pathway to citizenship for DACA recipients and dreamers who were brought to Arizona as children?
- **FOLLOW-UP:** How do your immigration plans strengthen our business relationships with Mexico and our economy for the long term?

Avoid Debate Pitfalls

Audiences enjoy candidate forums when the discussions are about topics that interest them. The narrower a topic or, the more limited the discussion’s scope becomes, the higher the likelihood of losing the audience’s attention. Following are some subjects that did not make the Arizona Voters’ Agenda because they are not important to the majority of likely voters. Help candidates avoid dwelling on these pitfalls and proactively reroute the discussion to topics that most people care about.

Pitfall

Opposing the teaching of critical race theory and controversial topics.

Reducing income taxes.

Eliminating mail-in voting. Changing the law to require those who vote by mail to provide their driver’s license number or voter ID number in order for their vote to count.

Completing the wall on the border between the United States and Mexico.



Redirect to Voter Priority

Voters prioritize expanding career and technical education opportunities. What is your plan for that?

Voters want to invest in infrastructure over cutting taxes. What do you think about that?

Most voters don’t want to eliminate mail-in voting and want to keep voting accessible. How do you plan to keep elections secure while also keeping it easy to vote?

This isn’t a priority for the majority of voters. Most voters want comprehensive immigration reform with a pathway to citizenship. How do you propose we achieve this?

Keep it Nonpartisan

Nonpartisanship encourages attendance and is an effective tool for engaging community members around the issues that matter to them. Here are some tips for keeping a forum nonpartisan:

- Cover a broad range of topics.
- Determine the ground rules for fairness, like equal time limits to present views.
- Select a moderator comfortable with and skilled at staying impartial.
- Invite all viable candidates for a specific office and encourage each to attend.
- Choose a neutral site that is not associated with any party, candidate, or political group.
- Plan the questions: research and prepare questions and an approach for handling audience questions. Nonpartisan questions should not signal a strong bias for or against a candidate. Ask straightforward questions on the issues, but ensure balance across party lines.

Additional Resources

- Education Forward Arizona conducted an additional survey on voters' education priorities. For those survey findings, and additional questions for candidates, visit educationforwardarizona.org.
- Nonprofit VOTE – a national organization that helps nonprofits integrate voter and candidate engagement into their ongoing activities– offers a step-by-step guide to planning and hosting a debate or forum, in addition to other nonpartisan resources. www.nonprofitvote.org
- Citizens Clean Elections Commission – a nonpartisan commission created by voters to educate, provide campaign funding, and enforce campaign finance rules and laws – offers voter education and elections resources. www.azcleanelections.gov

Center for the Future of Arizona adapted this guide and developed the Arizona Voters' Agenda. The Arizona Voters' Agenda reflects recent survey research of Republican, Democratic, and independent/unaffiliated voters of all ages. The Agenda only includes what a majority of likely voters across the political spectrum say are the critical issues facing the state and makes clear that voters agree on what they value and want from their political leaders.