



ARTS CANDIDATE FORUM/EVENT Toolkit

Presented by Arts North Carolina



Why Host a Candidate Forum or Event?

- Inform your community about the economic, civic, and educational value of the arts.
- Educate candidates about the economic, civic, and educational value of the arts.
- Encourage policy decisions to aid the arts and culture community.
- Increase awareness of the current challenges facing the arts.
- Promote voter participation in your community.
- Grow recognition for your organization and its mission.
- Build relationships with elected officials and community leaders.
- Expose the community to candidates for office in a nonpartisan way.

What Can Arts Related Candidate Forums or Events Provide That the Candidates Want?

- Nonpartisan event where they can be given an unbiased opportunity to be heard.
- A large audience of voters to hear their message.
- Respected host non-profit organization(s) to provide the opportunity.
- Time to meet informally and directly with voters.
- Information in advance about your organization and the issues to be covered.



DO'S AND DON'TS (IMPORTANT RULES FOR NONPROFITS & CANDIDATE EVENTS)

DO

- 👍 Keep your event nonpartisan and unbiased.
- 👍 Invite all candidates in the race (Check the official listing of candidates from your state or county election board, and/or county political party offices).
- 👍 Make equal effort to encourage each candidate to attend.
- 👍 Treat all candidates equally in every way at all times.
- 👍 Limit the time each candidate can speak if hosting a Q&A or debate.
- 👍 Encourage attendees to vote on or before Election Day.
- 👍 Provide attendees with nonpartisan information about the election (voting locations, hours, absentee voting or mail-in voting, required materials like ID, ballot measures).

DON'T

- 👎 Endorse or oppose a candidate in any way whatsoever.
- 👎 Make a campaign contribution or expenditure for or against a candidate.
- 👎 Rank candidates on who is most favorable to your issues..
- 👎 Ask candidates to agree with specific positions of the sponsoring organization.
- 👎 Show favorability to a candidate in any way whatsoever.
- 👎 Tell attendees which candidate to support or which party to register under.
- 👎 Do anything for one candidate that you haven't done for all the candidates in the race.
- 👎 Bring up a candidate's past voting record when asking questions.
- 👎 Ask a candidate to make a promise to support a specific piece of legislation.

STEPS TO HOSTING A CANDIDATE FORUM OR EVENT

STEP 1

ABOUT 12 WEEKS BEFORE EVENT

- **Set a date, time, and place for the event.**
 - If hosting in-person, choose a central location that is ADA compliant and easily accessible to those with disabilities.
 - Check to see if other community and/or campaign events conflict with your choice of date and time.
- **Decide whether the event will be in-person, virtual, or hybrid.**
 - See "Candidate Event Formats" section below.
- **Decide on an event format.**
 - See "Candidate Event Formats" section below.

STEP 2

ABOUT 10 -12 WEEKS BEFORE EVENT

- **Reach out to other organizations to partner or co-sponsor.**
 - This can help divide the work of planning and increase turnout at the event.
 - This can be arts organizations, or other organization within the community.
 - Including additional issue areas (i.e. Art & Affordable Housing) to the event as part of a partnership with another organization may expand the reach of the event, but may also dilute the impact and shift focus from the arts content.
- **Invite the candidates and brief them on the event.**
 - Get the OFFICIAL list of candidates from the State or County Election Board
 - Emphasize that the event will be nonpartisan.
 - Follow up with candidates during the planning process to keep them informed.
 - In your invitation, share some data about the impact of the arts and creative economy in your community.

STEP 3

ABOUT 8 WEEKS BEFORE EVENT

- **Create a communications plan.**
 - Consider which media sources and outlets (TV, radio, print, online) to contact in order to promote the event. You may create a press release for the event.
 - Reach out to other arts organizations to promote the event widely.
- **Create a plan for turnout.**
 - See "Marketing the Event" section below.
- **Select a moderator.**
 - Using a well-known community leader can help increase turnout.
 - Someone who is knowledgeable about the arts in your community is helpful.
- **Create a 5-to-10-minute presentation (live and/or video) to share at the event.**
 - See "What Information Should You Provide?" section below.
 - This will educate candidates and audience and provide context for the event.

STEP 4

ABOUT 4-6 WEEKS BEFORE EVENT

- **Confirm candidates' and moderator's attendance.**
- **Recruit volunteers.**
 - Volunteer tasks may include promoting the event, greeting participants and candidates, setting up and cleaning up, and informing audience about upcoming elections.
- **Promote the event through your organization's platforms.**
- **Invite the press (TV, radio, print, online) and possibly send out a press release (see "Sample Press Release on page 9).**

STEP 5

ABOUT 2 WEEKS BEFORE EVENT

- Determine set-up and day-of logistics.
- Create a timeline for the run of the event.
- Confirm volunteers' attendance and duties (set-up, run of event, clean-up).
- Select a timekeeper. (This is very important for Candidate Forums.)
- Continue to promote the event through all outlets and networks.
- Reissue the press release to the media.
- Send the candidates materials or video from the 5-to-10-minute presentation, especially if they will be answering questions about this information at the event.

STEP 6

DAY OF THE EVENT

- Complete set-up of in-person or virtual event space.
- Have staff or volunteers greet the attendees.
- Be sure to share election/voting information with the attendees.
- Host the event.
- Share the 5-to-10-minute presentation (live and/or video).
- Be sure to stay on schedule. Candidates are very busy campaigning.
- Be sure the event stays non-partisan, unbiased, and engaging.
- Clean up after the event.

STEP 7

WITHIN 1 WEEK AFTER THE EVENT

- Send all participants thank-you messages.
 - Especially candidates, but also audience members, partner organizations, and volunteers.
 - Handwritten notes and letters are best, but emails can suffice.
- Post images and narrative on social media, websites, and blogs.

Live Candidate Forum hosted by
the Arts Council of Wilmington
and New Hanover County



CANDIDATE FORUM & EVENT FORMATS

Online

- **Q&A (giving each candidate equal time to answer questions):**
 - Begin with an icebreaker question such as “What was the last local arts event you attended?”
 - Can include audience questions as well (should be screened to maintain nonpartisanship).
 - Be sure to provide arts context in the phrasing of the questions or reference the arts-focused presentation.
 - Can include follow up questions if desired.
- **Debate:**
 - Works best with fewer candidates. Rules must be clearly established.
 - Provide questions before the event and get rules approved by all candidates.
 - Debates can allow candidates to engage each other.
 - Debates are more difficult to manage/moderate than timed Q&A.

Benefits of hosting online:

- No venue costs.
- No venue set-up/clean-up.
- No issues of parking or commuting.
- Easily accessible to those living further away or with busy schedules.
- If the event is recorded and shared, it can reach even more people.

In-Person

- **Meet and Greet (allows candidates to meet with voters informally):**
 - Share stories about how the arts have personally impacted you and the challenges the industry is facing.
 - Should include an opportunity for candidates to introduce themselves.
 - Presentation about arts will provide context for conversations.
- **Q&A (giving each candidate equal time to answer questions):**
 - Begin with an icebreaker question such as “What was the last local arts event you attended?”
 - Can include audience questions as well (may want to be screened to maintain nonpartisanship).
 - Be sure to provide arts context in the phrasing of the questions or reference the arts-focused presentation.
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Benefits of hosting in-person:

- Easier for candidates to meet individually with voters.
- Easier for attendees to mingle/network.
- Participants will likely be more engaged.
- Hosting in a gallery, museum, arts center, or theater may serve as a physical reminder of the importance of the arts.
- Less chance of technological difficulties.

The 1-2 Punch



One of the best ways for your event to have the most impact on candidates and the community is to host 2 events: one inviting all the candidates in a race before the primary (when a broader field of candidates is looking to stand out), and another with the remaining candidates before the general election.

The second event may engage candidates for other offices as well. For example: the first event can feature a broad field of primary candidates for county commission and then the second event can feature the narrowed

field for county commission as well as candidates for the state legislature from local districts. This is a great way to ensure candidates will have a comprehensive knowledge of the local creative economy so they will be more likely to support the arts once elected to office. This method also builds name recognition for your organization and develops stronger relationships with elected officials.

Combining Online & In-Person

- Broadcasting or recording all or part of a candidate event and sharing it (whether you're posting it on your website, sending it to your email list, or sharing it in on social media) allows it to reach more people that otherwise wouldn't be able to make it to an event in-person.
- This would work best for a Q&A or debate format.
- If you only post or distribute portions, be sure to do so equally, so as not to show favor. For example, show every candidates response to the same question, not highlights.

WHAT INFORMATION SHOULD BE PROVIDED IN THE ARTS-FOCUSED PRESENTATION?

Many candidates will not have an extensive knowledge about their local arts community. Providing this information at the beginning of the event will help them to thoughtfully (and favorably) speak about arts issues. We strongly suggest creating a 5-to-10-minute presentation to share at the event including:

- The economic impact of the arts and creative economies in your community.
- The impact of the arts on members of your community.
- The challenges facing the arts (especially after the pandemic).
- Current public funding for the arts and how an increase would be utilized.
- Current or future legislation influencing the arts.
- Key programs and achievements of your organization.
- Ongoing arts projects and grant programs in your community.
- Highlight at least one fact or program for children's arts education.

MARKETING THE EVENT

- **Engage your networks**
 - Use your email list, website, and social media accounts to publicize the event.
 - Enlist other arts organizations to do the same.
- **Utilize local media sources**
 - Reach out to local blogs, newspapers, radio stations, and TV channels to promote your event.
 - Get your event date on published local calendars.
- **Ask candidates to share their participation in the event publicly.**
- **Reach out to your county political party chairs.**
 - They can promote the event among the local political community.

SUCCESS STORY

Wilmington: *The 1-2 Punch*



- The Arts Council of Wilmington and New Hanover County hosted a live candidate forum with nearly all New Hanover County Commission candidates during the primary, then a separate online forum with the remaining County Commission candidates as well as candidates for NC House and NC Senate seats leading up to the general election.

- Arts Council Executive Director Rhonda Bellamy shared presentations about the impact and value of the arts sector and also moderated at each event.
- Candidates answered questions about arts engagement from a moderator and the audience.
- After the first event, commissioners increased the county's investment in the Arts Council from \$10,000 to \$45,000 (350% increase). This effort was led by incumbent candidates on the commission that had participated in the candidate forum.



Raleigh: *The Meet & Greet*



- A group of Raleigh arts organization leaders joined together in 2019 to plan a meet-and-greet event with candidates for mayor and city council.
- Over 50 community members and 9 candidates came for the event.

- Candidates had the opportunity to meet constituents and learn about the strong local arts community.
- Attendees had the opportunity to engage candidates in conversations about the importance of arts education and the creative economy.
- The event was held in a gallery space at an arts center during a downtown-wide "First-Friday" event which showcased the arts and their vital role in the local economy and community.



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

[Date]

[Media Contact]

[Your Organization] to Host Candidate Forum for the Arts The forum will feature candidates for [office]

[City, State] — [Your Organization], an arts organization that provides [short description of organization's work] will host a candidate forum with candidates for [office] to engage the local community about the value of the arts.

The event will take place on **[date] at [time] at [location]**, and will enable candidates and community members to learn more about issues facing the arts and how voters and elected officials can be involved in supporting the local creative economy. The event is free and open to the public.

After a presentation about the impact of the organization and the arts community, candidates will answer questions about the local arts community and will have the opportunity to meet with voters after the Q&A portion. Audience members will have the chance to submit questions for the candidates as well. The Q&A portion will be recorded and made available on the [your organization] Facebook page.

Early voting will take place from [date-date]. Election Day is [date]. Polling locations, dates, and times can be found on the NC State Board of Elections website.

ABOUT [YOUR ORGANIZATION]

[Your Organization] is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization located in [city, state] with the goal of [organization mission statement]. [Brief description of organization's activities].

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SOURCES & RESOURCES

- Advocacy & Communication Solutions: Guide to Hosting a Successful Candidate Forum for 501(c)(3)s https://www.advocacyandcommunication.org/wp-content/themes/acs/docs/resources/eadvocacy/ACS_candidate_forum.pdf
- League of Women Voters: Toolkit for Candidate Events <https://www.lwvnyonline.org/advocacy/vote/2021/Toolkit-for-Candidate-Events-final-031121.pdf>
- Nonprofit Vote: Hosting a Candidate Forum <https://www.nonprofitvote.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/hosting-candidate-forum-nonprofit-guide-1.pdf>