



*Leaders for*  
**DEMOCRACY**  
LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS®

*League of Women Voters of Cooperstown Area &  
League of Women Voters of the Oneonta Area*

## **2020 GUIDELINES FOR ONLINE CANDIDATE DEBATES**

### **Purpose**

The League of Women Voters organizes and hosts candidate debates in order to:

- Educate the public about the issues in the campaign(s);
- Provide an opportunity for voters to witness candidates discuss those issues face-to-face;
- Stimulate public interest, and participation, in the election(s); and,
- Provide an opportunity for the public to engage the candidates.

The League believes these purposes are best served by adoption of nonpartisan, objective, and understandable written criteria for candidate inclusion. To that end, the League will apply the following guidelines for determining: a) whether candidates have the right to participate in League-sponsored debates and forums, and b) event operating rules.

### **Definition** of Debate, per the Federal Election Commission (FEC)

- includes at least two candidates;
- does not promote or advance one candidate over another; and,
- allows candidates to appear together, in face-to-face interaction, with opportunities to respond to each other.

### **Criteria for Candidate Participation**

- **Constitutional Eligibility:** Candidates must meet requirements of the NYS Constitution and the Constitution of the United States.
- **Ballot Access:** Candidates must have met all requirements to be on the ballot according to NYS Election laws. This includes major and minor parties; no write-ins.

Based on the above criteria, the League's event planning team will make the final determination of eligibility for participation and offer invitations to qualified candidates, to best serve the event's purposes.

### **Party Primary Elections**

In a primary election race, a debate among one political party's candidates for a given office is seen as a distinct and separate event. However, in a race for an office where multiple parties are each having primary elections to choose their candidates, our Leagues will seek to offer all parties the same opportunity to have an LWV-hosted candidate debate.

### **Empty Chair Debates**

According to the FEC, a campaign debate for federal office requires at least two candidates, "face to face." No one can substitute for a candidate. Therefore, if only one candidate accepts the invitation, or if only one candidate actually shows up for the debate, the only option is to cancel the debate. The FEC regulations are quite clear on this point. The LWV applies these criteria to all our candidate debates, for every office, at all levels of government.

### **Format for Candidate Debate**

We will use the Zoom Webinar platform and run the event as a webinar. Only the Moderator, the Candidates, and the Media Representative will appear on-screen. The public will be provided access to view the event online in real time. To avoid all risk of disruption, the public viewing audience will all be muted, not be visible, and have no access to a “chat function.” A recording of the event will quickly be posted online and be available online for on-demand viewing.

Through Media Releases, and FaceBook posts, the public will be invited to attend the event – and to pose questions for the candidates in advance.

Experienced League Members will serve as the event’s Host and Debate Moderator, timer, etc. Following candidate introductions by the Debate Moderator, each candidate will make a timed opening statement, with the order of speaking determined in advance by lot. For these statements and throughout the debate, a timekeeper will ensure that candidates stay within their allotted times. The overall duration of the debate and time limits will be decided in advance and agreed to by all participating candidates.

Questions for the candidates will come from the public and from a representative of local news media. The public will be invited to submit their questions by email in advance of and during the event. These will be reviewed and sorted by a panel of League members, to avoid inappropriate or repetitive questions. In some cases they will be edited for clarity before they are passed on to the Moderator, who will pose them to the candidates.

The media representative will pose their questions directly to the candidates, in real time. The Moderator will direct the order of questioning.

While a question may be directed to a specific candidate, each candidate will have the opportunity to respond to all questions. Candidate responses to questions will be time-limited. After one candidate has given their answer, the others may, if they so choose, take the same time to address the same point. Following this initial round of responses, at the Moderator’s discretion, additional brief rounds of time-limited candidate responses may be invited. This procedure encourages candidates to debate and hold each other to account. While challenges about policies or past actions are legitimate topics, the Moderator will cut off any personal attacks or criticisms. A candidate may decline to answer any question or choose not to use their full allotted time. This procedure is intended to allow equal time and be fair to all candidates.

Candidates will make timed closing statements in reverse order from their opening statements.

### **Recording**

Only those specifically authorized by our Leagues may record a League candidate event. The League of Women Voters owns the content of this forum and may post recordings of it in its entirety on League media. Any use of the authorized recording requires the advance approval of the League of Women Voters, except that other local Leagues may post the recording on their websites. Only licensed media, including TV, radio and newspapers are entitled to air portions of this recording, in keeping with Federal Communication Commission (FCC) regulations. No one is permitted to edit footage for campaign purposes.

### **Behavior, Appearance and Acceptance of Guidelines**

No campaign signs, buttons, literature, marked clothing, or any other campaign-related paraphernalia will be permitted to be worn or displayed. Name placards for participants to display on-camera will be provided.

### **Candidates Obligation**

By accepting our Leagues’ invitation for a proposed debate, candidates and their campaigns agree to abide by and support these Guidelines.