

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.

In This Guide

- Choose Discussion Format and Ground Rules
- Prepare Questions
- Avoid Debate Pitfalls
- Keep it Nonpartisan
- Additional Resources

Choose 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 Arizona Voters in Mind

Ask candidates about the issues most voters care about

Candidates for elected office often focus on talking points that appeal to small groups of reliable voters. Outline your questions for the debate or forum in advance, focusing on the vast majority want to hear about instead.

What do Arizona voters want to hear about from candidates?

Center for the Future of Arizona surveyed likely Republican, Democratic, and independent/unaffiliated voters 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. The topics on the Voters' Agenda are not single-partisan issues where one group supports an issue, and another does not. To be included, a 50% or higher majority of all likely voters must show a "strong" level of agreement on the issue, and 50% or higher majorities of every political and age segment must show "strong" or "somewhat strong" agreement.

 **Pro-tip:** When preparing for the debate or forum, first review the 2024 Arizona Voters' Agenda survey data at arizonafuture.org/arizonavotersagenda.

Starter List of Questions from the 2024 Arizona Voters' Agenda



Education

1. How will you increase investments in K-12 funding as Arizona faces a budget deficit?
2. What should Arizona do to ensure every school has the resources needed to deliver quality education that prepares every child for the future?
3. What will you do to ensure more students succeed in reading and math?
4. How will you ensure that private schools receiving ESA/voucher state dollars will be held equally accountable to financial and performance requirements and employment standards as public schools?
5. How will you expand access to post-secondary education, including opportunities for dual enrollment for all students while in high school, and expanded need-based financial aid for students to attend colleges, universities, and trade schools?



Immigration

1. Arizonans want progress on immigration. Understanding that immigration policy is not solely determined at the state level, what actions will you advocate for at the federal level?
2. In light of broad agreement on the need for comprehensive immigration reform, what steps will you take to create a pathway to citizenship?
3. How do you propose to balance the humanitarian needs at the border with the imperative for a functioning border that supports commerce?
4. How do you define a functioning border for commerce and immigration?



Housing

1. What specific policies will you propose to make housing more accessible to middle and low-income earners?
2. How will you ensure that state and local governments take a more active role in addressing homelessness?
3. What measures will you propose to encourage the development of housing that is affordable, given the state's budget constraints?







State Spending

1. Voters strongly believe Arizona needs higher levels of planning and preparedness to ensure we have the resources and infrastructure to support projected growth and maintain a high quality of life. How are you planning to prepare for growth?
2. What are your plans to ensure that Arizona's infrastructure can support the state's anticipated growth, particularly in the context of a state budget deficit?
3. Acknowledging the critical role of transportation infrastructure and childcare in Arizona's economic success, how do you plan to prioritize these areas?
4. Arizona has to balance its budget. Voters want to invest in infrastructure and childcare programs and don't want to cut education, healthcare, or public safety. What do you think the state should do about the projected deficit?

The available 2024 Arizona Voters' Agenda and Questions for Candidates reflect one of two surveys planned for the 2024 Arizona Voters' Agenda. Findings and questions on additional topics like water and elections will be released September 2024.

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 2024 Arizona Voters' Agenda because they do not reach majority agreement across all political and general lines. Help candidates avoid dwelling on these pitfalls and proactively reroute the discussion to topics that most people care about.

Avoid Topics Without Majority Support	Voter Priority
Funding level of the ESA/voucher program	 Accountability for private schools receiving state funding from ESAs/vouchers
Restrict use of school restrooms and locker rooms by transgender students	 Ensure all teachers are trained in the most effective methods for teaching reading
Reduce restrictions and regulations on affordable housing and multi-family developments	 Leaders figure out how to expand affordable housing options
Use money from the \$1.5 billion in Arizona's rainy-day fund to balance the state budget	 Leaders figure out how to protect essential services in face of budget deficit

Keep it Nonpartisan

Nonpartisanship encourages attendance and is an effective tool for engaging all community members. 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, and ensure balance across party lines.

Additional Resources

- 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
- Arizona Town Hall Voting and Elections Reports aztownhall.org
- The Flinn Foundation’s Arizona Civic Exchange—CivEx Series flinn.org
- Arizona Civic Life Partnership – a collaboration between CFA and the Arizona Center for Civic Leadership brings organizations together statewide to strengthen civic life in Arizona. arizonafuture.org/aclp

Center for the Future of Arizona adapted this guide and develops the Arizona Voters’ Agenda every election cycle. The Arizona Voters’ Agenda reflects current public opinion 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 across the political spectrum agree on what they value and want from their political leaders.