

**Ontario Municipal
Election 2026**

Candidate Forums Guide



Association of
Municipalities
of Ontario



democratic
engagement
exchange

at Toronto Metropolitan
University

The Association of Municipalities of Ontario supporting efforts to increase voter turnout

This guide is part of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario's (AMO) broader campaign to improve the health of local democracies in Ontario. Through AMO's Board supported Healthy Democracy Project (HDP), AMO has, for the past four years, been working to support their members to:

- Improve the tone of political discourse;
- Help people understand the important role of local government and elected officials;
- Support AMO members to be equity-informed leaders;
- Encourage and support more people to run for local office; and
- Encourage more people to participate in local decision making.

One of the principal ways to engage in democracy is to vote and one of the most used ways to measure local democratic health is to track how many people turn up to vote.

All of the HDP initiatives over the past four years have been based in member engagement, new and existing research, strategic planning, testing, and then the subsequent development of practical tools, resources, and training.

In AMO's voter turnout research/resource, Turn Up the Turn Out, the central conclusion is that engaged and informed residents vote. If you wait until election time to motivate, you've waited too long. We also know that the decline in candidates running for office, both new and returning, matches and contributes to declining voter turnout.

Based on these central realities, AMO focused early efforts to understanding the barriers to running for office, and also into developing civic education resources for elected officials and educators.

Over the past four years, we've taken a step-by-step approach to improving the political environment and the understanding of its importance to local community vitality and quality of life. That includes the development of AMO's Leading with Respect Handguides, the introduction of a new series of training and resources for new and returning candidates, and a major public affairs campaign to encourage people to run and to vote in local elections.

We must recognize that the challenging trends we're facing in local elections and democracies have been growing over multiple election cycles and will require a sustained, sector-wide response. At the same time, we can also acknowledge the hopeful signs that more partners, community organizations, and institutions have committed to supporting local democracies.

The voter turnout resources developed and shared here from AMO are the result of four years of building knowledge, relationships, and partners. Elected officials, municipalities, civil societies, community groups, and institutions have been working, increasingly, over the past four years to engage prospective voters. These resources are designed to help finish the deal. To help move those voters to voting booths.

Please join us in this effort. Share these resources widely and take advantage of the tools and resources within.

Guide to the Guide

Before you get started, here is what you will find in this guide. You do not need to use every section or plan a large event. Start with the pieces that match your community, your capacity, and the kind of conversation you want to create.

Section	What you'll find
1. Core principles	A simple foundation for hosting a forum that is non-partisan, welcoming, relevant to daily life, and grounded in respectful disagreement.
2. Choose the right format	A menu of options, from traditional all-candidates meetings to informal meet-and-greets, community conversations, candidate visits, hybrid events, and recorded responses.
3. Handling events with multiple wards or races	Guidance for keeping the event fair and understandable when candidates are running in different wards, races, school board areas, or municipalities.
4. Build the event around the audience	Ways to design the forum for the people you most want to reach, especially residents who may not usually attend political events.
5. Work with trusted partners	Ideas for working with libraries, community organizations, student groups, accessibility organizations, cultural groups, local media, and other partners who can help the event feel rooted in the community.
6. Invite candidates fairly	Practical guidance for inviting candidates consistently, setting RSVP deadlines, tracking responses, and communicating clearly with candidates and residents.
7. Choose a welcoming and accessible location	Considerations for choosing a space that fits your format, feels comfortable, and is easy for people to get to and use.

Section	What you'll find
8. Make the forum easier — and more appealing — to attend	Ideas for making the event feel inviting, including food, music, child-friendly spaces, clear signage, accessibility supports, language considerations, and a warm room setup.
9. Set clear expectations for candidates and audience members	Suggestions for helping everyone understand what kind of event they are attending, how they can participate, and how respectful discussion will be supported.
10. Preventing and responding to disruptions	A calm, practical approach to planning for difficult moments, including who should make decisions and how staff or volunteers can respond.
11. Select a strong moderator, MC, or facilitator	Guidance on choosing the person who will guide the event, keep it fair, support the tone, and help people participate.
12. Choose questions, issues, and activities that connect to residents' lives	Ideas for formal questions and more creative activities that help residents raise the issues that matter most to them.
13. Make it available online — live and afterward	Ways to extend the reach of the forum through livestreaming, recording, summaries, short clips, and online access to voting information.
14. Promote the forum as a community event	Suggestions for inviting people warmly, using trusted messengers, encouraging RSVPs, and making the event feel like a chance to meet candidates and neighbours.
15. Working with the media	Tips for working with local media to promote, moderate, cover, record, or share the event while being clear about roles, fairness, and privacy.
16. Help residents take the next step	A reminder to connect the forum to official information about where, when, and ways to vote.

Section	What you'll find
17. Follow up	Simple ways to thank participants, share the recording or summary, post voting information, and capture lessons for next time.
18. Other helpful resources	Links to more detailed, format-specific resources once you know what kind of forum you want to host.
Appendices	Ready-to-adapt templates for candidate invitations, candidate confirmations, neutral decline/no-response language, and a location checklist.

A short guide for municipalities and civil society organizations

Municipal elections are local. They are about the people who make decisions that shape daily life: roads and transit, parks and recreation, housing, policing, emergency services, libraries, community programs, taxes, planning, local services, and the places where people live, gather, work, and play.

But many residents do not always see the connection between municipal decisions and the issues they care about. Candidate forums can help make that connection.

A good candidate forum gives residents a chance to hear from the people running to represent them, ask questions about local issues, and make a more informed decision when they vote. It can also help candidates hear directly from residents, including people who are too often left out of political conversations.

This guide is for municipalities, libraries, community organizations, neighbourhood groups, post-secondary institutions, service providers, local media partners, and other local leaders interested in hosting or supporting a candidate forum. It is not a detailed step-by-step manual. Instead, it offers a practical framework for designing an event that is non-partisan, welcoming, respectful, accessible, and useful to voters.

A candidate forum does not need to be a formal debate in an auditorium. It can be a moderated all-candidates meeting, a community conversation, a meet-and-greet, a youth-led Q&A, a candidate visit to an existing program, a livestreamed discussion, or a short recorded interview series. The best format is the one that fits your community, your capacity, and the people you are trying to reach.

The goal is simple: help more residents see why the election matters, learn who is running, and feel ready to participate.

Quick start: the most important decisions

Before you begin planning, make five basic decisions.

First, decide who you are trying to reach. A forum designed for residents who already follow municipal politics may look very different from one designed for first-time voters, students, newcomers, tenants, rural residents, seniors, parents, or people who have never attended a political event before.

Second, decide which candidates you are inviting. Will the event focus on the mayoral race, a specific ward, school board trustee candidates, regional council, or several wards? This decision shapes the format, length, invitations, questions, promotion, and staffing.

Third, choose a format that fits the audience. A traditional all-candidates debate can work well, but it is not always the most welcoming or useful format. Some communities may prefer a moderated Q&A, a community meal with candidates, a meet-and-greet, a short recorded interview series, or a candidate visit to an event that residents already attend.

Fourth, make fairness and non-partisanship visible. Invite candidates consistently, give them the same information, apply the same expectations, and be transparent about the format. Residents and candidates should understand that the event is designed to inform voters, not promote or oppose anyone running for office.

Fifth, help residents take the next step. A forum should not end with the last question. Share official information about where, when, and ways to vote, and make the forum available afterward whenever possible.

A simple planning timeline

The timeline below can be adapted depending on your capacity. A smaller, informal event may need less time. A large, hybrid, or multi-ward forum will need more.

Six to eight weeks before the event

Confirm the purpose, audience, and format. Identify partners and decide which race or races the forum will cover. Check the municipality's candidate list and confirm where official election information will be posted. Begin looking at possible venues or online platforms.

Two to four weeks before the event

Confirm participating candidates. Share the format, expectations, arrival time, recording information, and campaign material guidelines with all candidates. Gather questions, issues, or discussion themes from residents and partners. Prepare plain-language voting information to share at the event.

Four to six weeks before the event

Invite candidates and ask them to RSVP by a clear deadline. Confirm the venue, moderator or MC, accessibility supports, livestream or recording plan, and basic event expectations. Begin promotion through partners and community channels.

This is also the right time to develop a simple staffing plan. Identify who will lead the event, who will communicate with candidates, who will welcome attendees, who will support the moderator or MC, who will manage technology, who will handle media, who will monitor online participation, and who has the authority to make decisions if a disruption or safety issue arises.

One week before the event

Send reminders to candidates, partners, volunteers, media, and registered attendees. Confirm the room layout, microphones, livestream, signage, accessibility supports, moderator notes, staffing roles, and disruption response plan.

Day of the event

Welcome candidates, volunteers, media, and attendees. Review the purpose and expectations at the start of the event. Keep time fairly. Make sure people know how to participate. Share voting information before people leave.

One week after the event

Thank candidates, partners, volunteers, media, and attendees. Post the recording or summary. Share official voting information again. Note what worked and what you would change next time.

1. Core principles

Keep it non-partisan

Candidate forums should not support or oppose any candidate. The host's role is to create a fair process where residents can hear from candidates and candidates can hear from residents.

Being non-partisan does not mean avoiding important issues. It means asking fair questions, treating candidates consistently, applying the same expectations to everyone, and avoiding commentary that favours one candidate over another.

For municipalities and organizations using public resources, it is especially important to confirm any relevant rules about candidate access, use of space, campaign materials, third-party advertising, livestreaming, and promotion. When in doubt, contact your municipal clerk.

Make it relevant to daily life

People are more likely to participate when the forum is clearly connected to their lives. The invitation, promotion, questions, and opening remarks should help residents understand that municipal elections are about real decisions that affect their families, neighbourhoods, services, taxes, housing, roads, transit, parks, community safety, and public spaces.

A forum should help residents answer two questions: What do local elected officials do? And how do their decisions affect me, my family, and my community?

Design for everyone

Traditional candidate forums often attract people who are already engaged. That is valuable, but it is not enough. If the goal is to reach new and infrequent voters, the event has to be designed with them in mind from the beginning.

That might mean choosing a different location, offering food, partnering with trusted community organizations, avoiding jargon, making the event shorter, creating opportunities for informal interaction, livestreaming or recording the event, or bringing candidates into an existing community gathering rather than asking residents to attend a standalone political event.

Support respectful disagreement

A good forum is not about avoiding conflict or difficult questions. Elections are about choices, and candidates should be able to disagree. The purpose of clear expectations and strong moderation is not to make the conversation bland. It is to make sure disagreement can happen without intimidation, personal attacks, or disruption.

Civility should be understood as the condition that makes democratic disagreement possible.

Make the event useful after it ends

Many residents will not be able to attend in person or watch live. They may be working, caregiving, travelling, managing a disability, living far from the venue, or simply unsure whether a political event is for them. Recording the forum, sharing written summaries, posting candidate responses, and linking to official voting information can greatly extend the value of the event.

2. Choose the right format

There is no single right format. The best format depends on the audience, number of candidates, geography, level of interest, and capacity of the host.

A formal debate can be useful, but it can also feel intimidating or performative. A less formal event can be more welcoming, but it still needs structure and fairness. The format should serve the purpose of the event.

Traditional all-candidates forum

A traditional all-candidates forum works best when there is a clear race, a manageable number of candidates, a neutral moderator, and an audience that wants to compare candidates side by side. Candidates usually make opening statements, answer prepared or audience-submitted questions, and may give closing remarks.

This format may not work well when there are too many candidates, when the audience is unlikely to sit through a long event, or when the tone is expected to be highly adversarial. In those cases, consider shorter answers, themed rounds, written questions only, or a different format.

Moderated Q&A

A moderated Q&A is less formal than a debate. Candidates respond to questions from the host, partners, residents, or the moderator. The tone is conversational, but the structure still gives candidates equal time and keeps the event fair.

This format can work well for community organizations, libraries, campuses, and local groups that want residents to hear practical answers without creating a highly adversarial atmosphere.

Meet-and-greet

A meet-and-greet allows residents to speak with candidates informally, often at tables or in rotating small groups. It can be paired with a short formal program where each candidate gives a brief introduction.

This format is especially useful when there are many candidates or when residents may be more comfortable in conversation than at a microphone. It can also work well in community centres, libraries, markets, campuses, parks, local restaurants, service hubs, or neighbourhood events.

The main challenge is fairness. Hosts should make sure all candidates have similar space, visibility, and opportunity to interact with residents.

Structured community conversations

In this format, residents discuss local priorities in small groups and candidates listen, rotate between tables, or respond briefly at the end. This approach can shift the forum from “candidates speaking at residents” to “candidates listening to residents.”

This format can be especially useful for communities whose experiences are often missing from political debate. It can also be a good fit for issue-focused events, such as housing, food security, accessibility, youth, seniors, local services, or community safety.

Candidate visit to an existing event

Sometimes the most inclusive choice is not to create a new election event at all. Instead, candidates can be invited to an existing gathering: a community meal, drop-in program, youth event, newcomer program, seniors’ gathering, tenant meeting, campus event, neighbourhood association meeting, cultural event, or service agency program.

This approach meets people where they already are. It can reduce the formality of election engagement and make it easier for residents to participate. The host should still be clear about non-partisanship, fairness, and how candidates are invited.

Online or hybrid forum

Online access can be added to many formats: a traditional debate, Q&A, community conversation, or recorded candidate interview series. A hybrid forum can help residents participate across distance, mobility barriers, work schedules, caregiving responsibilities, or discomfort with public meetings.

A hybrid event should be planned as a real format, not an afterthought. Decide who will monitor online questions, whether comments will be enabled, whether captions will be provided, and how the recording will be shared afterward.

Short recorded candidate responses

When a live event is difficult, candidates can be asked to respond to the same questions in writing or on video. Each candidate should receive the same questions, deadline, instructions, and word or time limit.

This can be a practical option when scheduling is difficult, there are many candidates, or residents need a resource they can access on their own time. It is also useful for multi-ward events where a single live forum would be too crowded.

3. Handling events with multiple wards or races

Municipal elections can be complicated. A single community organization, campus, library system, or service agency may serve residents from several wards or even several municipalities. Before inviting candidates, decide how broad the event should be.

If the event includes candidates from multiple wards, be careful not to create an event where some candidates receive more attention than others simply because of the format. You may want to divide the event into ward-specific sections, host separate rooms or tables by ward, create a recorded candidate response page for each ward, or focus the live portion on the mayoral race while providing resources for councillor and trustee candidates.

For organizations that serve a broad geography, it may be more useful to host a “meet your local candidates” event with clearly marked tables than a long debate with dozens of candidates. Another option is to invite candidates to submit answers to a small number of common questions and then organize responses by municipality, ward, or school board.

The guiding principle is fairness. Residents should be able to understand which candidates are running to represent them, and candidates should have a comparable opportunity to participate.

4. Build the event around the audience

A candidate forum should be designed for the people you most want to reach, not only for the people who are already most likely to attend.

Start with a simple question: who would benefit from this event but might not normally come?

That may include first-time voters, students, newcomers, renters, rural residents, parents, caregivers, seniors, residents with disabilities, residents who speak languages other than English, or people who feel disconnected from politics.

Your community partners will often know what will work best. Some audiences may appreciate a structured event where the expectations are clear and questions are moderated. Others may prefer a warmer and more social format, with food, conversation, and a chance to meet candidates informally. Some may not want to ask questions in public but may be comfortable submitting questions in advance. Others may not attend a “candidate forum” but will join a community meal or neighbourhood gathering where candidates are present.

The point is not to make assumptions. Ask trusted partners what would make the event feel useful, safe, and worth attending.

5. Work with trusted partners

Partnerships can make a forum more welcoming, credible, and better attended. They can also help the event reach people who may not respond to official notices, campaign messaging, or traditional media.

Potential partners include community organizations, libraries, settlement agencies, tenant associations, youth organizations, seniors' groups, accessibility organizations, Indigenous organizations and local First Nations, Métis, or Inuit partners, neighbourhood associations, business associations, cultural organizations, schools, colleges, universities, student unions, local media, and faith or community groups where appropriate.

Different partners can play different roles.

Community organizations can help identify local issues, recruit attendees, gather questions, host conversations, and provide trusted messengers.

Libraries and public institutions can offer neutral, familiar, and accessible spaces.

Schools, colleges, universities, student unions, and student life offices can help reach young and first-time voters, especially where students may be eligible to vote locally.

Accessibility and disability organizations can help identify practical barriers that hosts may otherwise miss.

Cultural and language-based organizations can help with outreach, translation of promotional materials, interpretation, and community-specific questions.

Local media can help promote the event, moderate, livestream, report on candidate responses, and make information available to residents who cannot attend.

The best partnerships are not just promotional. They shape the event so that it feels like it belongs to the community.

6. Invite candidates fairly

A candidate forum must be fair and clearly non-partisan.

Decide which race or races the forum will cover, then invite all registered candidates for the same office, ward, or school board position. Use the same invitation process for all candidates and provide the same information to everyone.

The invitation should include the date, time, location, host organization, purpose, format, expectations, RSVP deadline, whether the event will be recorded or livestreamed, whether campaign materials are permitted, how questions will be selected, and who candidates can contact with questions.

Give candidates a clear deadline to respond. For example, you might ask candidates to confirm within one week of receiving the invitation or by a specific date. Let candidates know that the host may begin public promotion after that date and will indicate which candidates have confirmed.

Follow up when possible. Candidates and campaign teams receive many messages during an election. A phone call or second email can make a difference.

Keep a record of invitations, follow-ups, and responses. If some candidates decline or do not respond, be transparent with the audience. Avoid language that criticizes candidates for not attending; simply state who was invited and who confirmed.

If a candidate declines because of a scheduling conflict, consider offering a fair alternative, such as a written or recorded response to the same questions offered to all candidates. Do not create special opportunities for only one candidate.

Templates for candidate invitations, confirmations, and neutral decline or no-response language are included in the appendices at the end of this guide.

7. Choose a welcoming and accessible location

Location shapes who attends and how the event feels.

Traditional venues such as libraries, community centres, schools, campuses, council chambers, seniors' centres, and recreation centres can work very well, especially for structured forums. They are often familiar, accessible, and equipped with seating, washrooms, audio, and internet.

But non-traditional spaces can also be powerful. Parks, community gardens, local restaurants, pubs, cafés, markets, apartment common rooms, campus lounges, cultural centres, and program spaces can make an election event feel more like a community gathering and less like a formal political meeting.

The right location depends on the audience and format. A formal debate needs good acoustics, sightlines, seating, microphones, and timekeeping. A meet-and-greet needs enough space for movement and conversation. A community meal needs tables, food service, and a format that does not make people choose between eating and participating. A hybrid event needs reliable internet, power, lighting, audio, and a place for cameras that does not block the room.

Do not assume that the most "central" location is the most accessible. A central location for drivers may not be central for residents who rely on transit, walking, mobility devices, or rides from others.

A location checklist is included at the end of this guide.

8. Make the forum easier — and more appealing — to attend

Small choices can make a big difference. Coffee, tea, snacks, music, child-friendly spaces, welcoming greeters, clear signage, and a warm room setup can all make a forum feel less intimidating and more like a community event.

A candidate forum does not need to feel like a test of civic seriousness. It can feel like a neighbourhood gathering. Music, art, children's activities, displays from local organizations, a community resource table, or a short performance by a local musician, youth group, or cultural organization can help create a more welcoming atmosphere. These additions should not overwhelm the purpose of the event, but they can help people feel that they are entering a community space, not just a political one.

Food can change the room

Food is not just an incentive. It can change the tone of the event.

Sharing a meal or refreshments can help people feel welcome, encourage informal conversation, and make the event more accessible for residents coming directly from work, school, caregiving, or other responsibilities. It can also bring in people who might not otherwise attend a candidate event, especially if the forum is connected to an existing community meal, campus event, seniors' gathering, newcomer program, neighbourhood celebration, or community drop-in.

Food does not need to be expensive. Hosts can keep it simple with coffee, tea, fruit, snacks, pizza, samosas, sandwiches, or a light community meal. Community partners may be able to contribute refreshments, local businesses may be willing to provide food at reduced cost, and several organizations can share expenses. For informal events, a "coffee with the candidates" or "community supper and candidate conversation" may be easier and more appealing than a formal evening debate.

Accessibility and language

Interpretation and translation can also matter, but they require planning and resources. If full interpretation is not possible, consider translating promotional materials, offering plain-language summaries, working with community partners who can help explain the event, or inviting questions in multiple languages in advance.

Accessibility should be planned from the beginning. Consider physical access, seating, washrooms, sound, lighting, captions, ASL interpretation where possible, plain-language materials, sensory needs, and whether online access or recordings can help people who cannot attend in person.

The goal is to reduce the hidden barriers that often keep people from participating and to make the event feel worth attending.

9. Set clear expectations for candidates and audience members

Clear expectations help create a respectful event. They should be shared with candidates in advance and communicated to audience members before and at the event.

This is not only about rules or what is not allowed. It is also about helping people understand what kind of event they are attending. Is it a formal debate? A moderated Q&A? A community conversation? A meet-and-greet? Will audience members ask questions directly, submit questions in writing, speak in small groups, or move between candidate tables? The clearer the expectations, the more comfortable people will feel participating.

For candidates, expectations should cover speaking time, order of speaking, whether opening and closing remarks are allowed, how questions will be asked, whether candidates may respond to one another, what campaign materials are permitted, and whether the event will be recorded.

For audience members, expectations should explain the purpose of the event, how they can participate, how questions can be submitted, whether signs or campaign materials are allowed inside the event space, and how the host will respond if behaviour prevents others from participating.

The tone should be firm but welcoming. The goal is not to police residents unnecessarily. The goal is to create a space where people can participate without intimidation.

A simple opening statement can help:

"Tonight's forum is a space for residents to hear from candidates, ask questions about local issues, and take part in respectful democratic discussion. We welcome disagreement. We ask everyone to focus on issues, respect time limits, and treat one another with courtesy. The moderator may interrupt, move on, or pause the event if needed to keep the forum fair and respectful."

For a less formal event, the opening can be warmer and simpler:

"Tonight is a chance to meet candidates, connect with neighbours, and talk about the issues that matter in our community. We want everyone to feel welcome. Please help us make this a respectful space where people can listen, ask questions, and take part in the conversation."

10. Select a strong moderator, MC, or facilitator

For a formal all-candidates forum, the moderator is central to the success of the event. A good moderator protects fairness, tone, time, and trust.

For a less formal event, the role may look more like an MC, host, or facilitator. The person may not be asking every question or managing a debate, but they still need to guide the event, explain what is happening, help people participate, and respond calmly if something becomes difficult.

In all formats, everyone should know who is responsible for the flow of the event. Candidates should know who to listen to for time limits and instructions. Audience members should know who will explain the format and expectations. Volunteers should know who has authority to pause the event or manage issues.

The moderator, MC, or facilitator should be neutral, clear, respectful, and comfortable enforcing expectations. They do not need to be an expert on every issue. They need to understand the format, keep the event moving, communicate clearly, manage time, and respond calmly if things become difficult.

For some events, a local journalist, educator, community leader, librarian, student leader, or respected facilitator may be a good choice. The moderator or MC should not be publicly associated with any candidate's campaign.

For larger events, it can help to have a separate timekeeper, question screener, online moderator, and logistics lead so the moderator or MC can focus on the conversation.

11. Preventing and responding to disruptions

Most candidate forums are respectful and constructive. Still, it is wise to plan for difficult moments. A clear disruption plan protects residents, candidates, volunteers, staff, and the event itself.

Prevention starts before the event. Share expectations with candidates and attendees. Choose a room layout that allows people to enter and exit easily. Make sure the moderator or MC, volunteers, venue staff, and organizers know who will respond if someone becomes disruptive. For larger or higher-risk events, consider whether security, municipal staff, venue staff, or local authorities should be consulted in advance.

It should be clear who has responsibility for what. A simple staffing plan can include the following roles:

The event lead is responsible for overall decisions. This person should have the authority to pause the event, consult with venue staff, speak with security if present, or decide whether someone must be asked to leave.

The moderator or MC is responsible for the flow of the event. They remind the room of expectations, redirect the conversation, pause when needed, and avoid getting drawn into arguments with disruptive participants.

The floor lead or volunteer coordinator supports the room. They can speak quietly with attendees, help people find seats, identify issues early, and alert the event lead if a situation is escalating.

The candidate liaison supports candidates. They greet candidates, explain the format, answer logistical questions, and help ensure candidates know where to go if they have concerns.

The online moderator supports livestreamed or hybrid events. They monitor chat, manage online questions, remove abusive comments if needed, and alert the event lead to online issues.

Venue staff or security, where present, support safety and building protocols. They should know in advance what kind of event is being held and who the event lead is.

Disruption is not the same as disagreement. Residents may be frustrated, emotional, or direct. That is part of democratic life. The concern is behaviour that prevents the event from continuing or makes other people feel unsafe, intimidated, or unable to participate.

Examples of disruptive behaviour may include repeatedly interrupting speakers, refusing to stop when time is up, shouting over the moderator, using discriminatory or threatening language, moving into restricted areas, harassing candidates or attendees, or refusing to follow event expectations after a warning.

A tiered response is usually best.

First, the moderator or MC gives a calm reminder of the expectation.

Second, if the behaviour continues, the moderator or MC gives a clear warning and names the consequence.

Third, the moderator or MC may pause the event briefly so the event lead can speak with the person or consult with organizers.

Fourth, if necessary, the person may be asked to leave. Removal should be a last resort and should be based on behaviour, not on the viewpoint being expressed.

For online or hybrid events, the same principle applies. If comments, chat, or questions become abusive or disruptive, moderators may remove comments, mute participants, turn off chat, or limit questions to a moderated process.

After a serious disruption, debrief with the moderator or MC, volunteers, venue staff, and partners. Record what happened, what worked, and what should change next time.

12. Choose questions, issues, and activities that connect to residents' lives

Good questions help residents understand how candidates think, what they would prioritize, and how they would approach the role if elected. But not every forum needs to be built around formal questions.

In less formal formats, the goal may be to surface the issues that matter most to residents and create opportunities for candidates to listen and respond. This can be more engaging than a long sequence of microphone questions, especially for people who are new to political events or uncomfortable speaking in front of a crowd.

For example, hosts can create an “issues wall” where attendees place sticky notes under headings such as housing, roads and transit, parks and recreation, safety, affordability, youth, seniors, accessibility, or local services. The moderator or MC can then identify a few themes and ask candidates to respond.

Another option is a “priority dot” activity. Residents receive a few stickers and place them beside the issues they most want candidates to address. This creates a visual snapshot of community priorities and can help shape the conversation.

Hosts can also use table conversations, question cards, youth-led questions, community story prompts, or a “what would you ask council?” activity. These approaches can feel more social and energizing than asking people to line up at a microphone.

For formal questions, keep them clear, issue-focused, and easy for residents to understand. Avoid long statements disguised as questions. Avoid jargon. Where needed, briefly explain the issue before asking candidates to respond.

Strong questions often ask candidates to connect values to action. For example:

"What is one local issue you think council should address in the first year, and what would you do to move it forward?"

"How would you make municipal decision-making more accessible to residents who do not usually participate?"

"What do you think is one thing the municipality does well, and one thing it needs to improve?"

The best questions and activities help residents see the connection between the issues they care about and the choices they will make when they vote.

13. Make it available online — live and afterward

Online access can help residents participate even if they cannot attend in person. Whenever possible, livestream or record the event and post it afterward.

Before the event, confirm whether candidates consent to recording, where the recording will be posted, whether captions will be available, how online questions will be handled, and who will moderate online comments.

After the event, share the full recording, a written summary, or short clips. If you share candidate websites or contact information, do so equally. Always include official links to where, when, and ways to vote.

A forum can have more impact after the event than during the event if the recording and resources are easy to find and share.

14. Promote the forum as a community event

Promotion should begin early and should not rely only on posters, municipal websites, or people who already follow politics.

A candidate forum is not only an opportunity to hear from candidates. It is also an opportunity for residents to meet neighbours, connect with people who share their interests, learn about local issues, and feel part of their community. The invitation should make it clear that everyone is welcome, including people who have never attended a candidate event before.

The message should be warm, practical, and connected to daily life. Instead of only saying:

"Attend the Ward 3 All-Candidates Meeting."

Consider saying:

"Who will make decisions about housing, roads, parks, local services, and taxes in your community? Join your neighbours, meet the candidates, and connect with people who care about the future of Ward 3."

For a less formal event, the invitation can sound even more welcoming:

"Come for coffee, conversation, and a chance to meet the people running to represent your community. No political experience needed. Bring your questions, your neighbours, or just your curiosity."

A strong promotion plan uses multiple channels: community partner newsletters, local libraries and community centres, schools and campuses, student groups, local newspapers and radio, ethno-cultural media, neighbourhood associations, service agencies, social media, community Facebook groups, WhatsApp groups, posters in high-traffic spaces, and direct invitations from trusted local leaders.

RSVPs can help organizers plan food, seating, accessibility, interpretation, childcare, and online participation. Keep the RSVP process simple. Use a short online form, phone number, email address, or sign-up sheet through partner organizations. Make clear whether registration is required or simply encouraged. If space is limited, say so. If drop-ins are welcome, say that too.

Social media

Social media works best when posts are clear, visual, and easy to share. Create simple graphics with the date, time, location, format, accessibility information, RSVP link, and livestream link if available. Post more than once. Ask partners to share through their own channels.

Short videos from trusted local leaders can also help explain why the event is worth attending. A simple message can work well: "I'm going because I care about housing and parks in our neighbourhood. Join us to meet the candidates and talk with neighbours about what matters locally."

For online engagement, consider inviting residents to submit questions or identify issues in advance. This gives people a way to participate even if they cannot attend.

Community partner outreach

Partners are often the best messengers. Give them short newsletter text, social media graphics, posters, and a plain-language description of the event. Ask them to share the event directly with the residents, members, clients, students, or community members they serve.

Promotion through partners should not feel like a generic event notice. Encourage partners to explain why the forum matters to their community. A housing organization may emphasize tenant issues.

A student group may emphasize transit, affordability, and local services. A seniors' group may emphasize accessibility, safety, and recreation. A settlement agency may emphasize how municipal decisions affect daily life.

Suggested promotion timeline

Four weeks before the event, announce the forum, open RSVPs if using them, and ask partners to share.

Two to three weeks before the event, begin regular social media posts, distribute posters, and invite residents to submit questions or issues.

One week before the event, share confirmed candidates, accessibility information, food or childcare information if available, livestream details, and reminders through all partner channels.

The day before and day of the event, post a simple reminder with the time, location, RSVP or drop-in information, livestream link, and what residents can expect.

After the event, share the recording, summary, candidate responses, photos if appropriate, and official voting information.

15. Working with the press

Local media can play an important role in helping residents learn about candidates and the election. In some communities, local newspapers, radio stations, online outlets, or community newsletters may be among the most effective ways to reach voters.

Media can support a forum in several ways. They may help promote the event, moderate the discussion, livestream or record it, report on candidate responses, publish candidate answers to key questions, or share voting information afterward.

If you plan to work with media, be clear about roles. A journalist serving as a moderator should understand the format, expectations, time limits, and non-partisan purpose of the event. Media covering the event should know where they can film or take photos, whether audience members may be recorded, and who can answer logistical questions.

Consider preparing a short media advisory that includes the event purpose, date, time, location, participating candidates, host organizations, livestream link, media contact, and any photo or recording guidelines.

If your event is designed for residents who may not want to be photographed or filmed, say so clearly. You may need a designated media area, signage, or a reminder at the beginning of the event.

After the event, send media the recording, summary, key voting links, and any follow-up materials. The goal is to help more residents access useful, accurate, non-partisan election information.

16. Help residents take the next step

A candidate forum should end by helping residents know what to do next.

Share official information about election day, advance voting, mail-in voting, online voting or other local voting options where available, polling locations, the voters' list, voter ID, accessible voting, and who to contact with questions.

Remind participants that the municipal clerk or municipal election office is the official source for local voting information.

Whenever possible, provide this information in print, on screen, verbally, and in follow-up emails or posts.

17. Follow up

Follow-up helps turn a one-time event into a broader voter engagement resource.

Thank candidates, partners, volunteers, media, and attendees. Post the recording or summary. Share official voting information. Send unanswered questions to candidates if appropriate and fair. Ask attendees what was useful and what could be improved. Track basic information such as attendance, online views, partner involvement, and lessons learned.

The forum is not the end goal. The goal is to help residents feel informed, included, and ready to vote.

18. Other helpful resources

This guide is intended to be short and practical. Once you know the format you want to use, the resources below provide more detailed guidance, templates, and examples.

Some of these resources are Canadian and some are from the United States. U.S.-based resources can still be useful for practical planning ideas — such as formats, moderator roles, question processes, livestreaming, promotion, and room setup — but hosts should rely on their municipal clerk, municipal election office, and Canadian/Ontario guidance for election rules, voting information, candidate access, campaign finance, third-party advertising, and any legal requirements.

For a traditional all-candidates meeting

Canadian Unitarian Council — Your Guide to Hosting an All-Candidates Meeting

<https://cuc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Your-Guide-to-Hosting-an-All-Candidates-Meeting-.pdf>

This Canadian guide is useful for formal all-candidates meetings. It includes guidance on inclusion, accessibility, meeting format, question handling, publicity, equipment, room setup, sample schedules, suggested candidate and audience rules, and sample “hot seat” questions. It was written for a federal election, so hosts should adapt the election-specific details for Ontario municipal elections.

For an issue-based community conversation

Food Secure Canada — Eat Think Vote

<https://foodsecurecanada.org/category/campaign/eat-think-vote/>

Eat Think Vote is a Canadian example of a less traditional, issue-based candidate event model. It is useful for groups that want to invite candidates into a community conversation, centre lived experience, and connect the event to broader community advocacy and follow-up.

For a nonprofit or community organization hosting a structured forum

Nonprofit VOTE — Hosting a Candidate Forum: A Nonprofit Guide

<https://www.nonprofitvote.org/resource/hosting-a-candidate-forum-a-nonprofit-guide/>

This U.S.-based guide is useful for nonprofit and community organizations that want a more detailed planning resource for non-partisan candidate forums. The legal and nonprofit compliance sections should not be treated as applicable in Ontario, but the event-planning pieces are useful for thinking about turnout, candidate participation, questions, promotion, and follow-up.

For a detailed candidate forum planning toolkit

League of Women Voters of Virginia — Toolkit for Candidate Forums

https://my.lwv.org/sites/default/files/lwv-va_toolkit_for_candidate_forums-final_january_2024.pdf

This U.S.-based toolkit is useful for groups that want detailed guidance on structured candidate forums, including planning roles, candidate management, logistics, forum formats, virtual or hybrid events, and post-event reporting. Hosts should use it for practical process ideas, not election rules.

Closing words

Hosting a candidate forum can feel like a lot of work. It takes time to invite candidates, find a space, work with partners, promote the event, prepare questions or activities, manage logistics, and create a respectful environment.

It is worth it.

Candidate forums help residents see that local democracy is not abstract. It is about the services, spaces, relationships, and decisions that shape daily life. They give people a chance to hear from candidates directly, ask better questions, and feel more confident about voting. They also remind candidates that public leadership begins with listening.

Every forum will not be perfect. Every event does not need to be large. A conversation in a library, a community meal with candidates, a student Q&A, a livestream, a neighbourhood meet-and-greet, or a candidate visit to an existing program can all help strengthen local democracy.

When residents feel welcomed, informed, and respected, they are more likely to believe that their voice matters. That belief is at the heart of voter participation — and at the heart of a healthy local democracy.

Appendix A: Candidate invitation template

Subject: Invitation to participate in [Forum Name] on [Date]

Dear [Candidate Name],

On behalf of [Host Organization], I am pleased to invite you to participate in [Forum Name], a non-partisan candidate forum for the 2026 Ontario municipal election.

The purpose of this event is to help residents hear from candidates, learn about local issues, and feel more prepared to vote. All registered candidates for [Office/Ward/Race] are being invited to participate.

Event details:

Date: [Date]

Time: [Start time – End time]

Location: [Venue and address / Online link to follow]

Host: [Host organization(s)]

Format: [Brief description of format]

Audience: [Brief description, if helpful]

Recording/livestream: [Yes/No. Include where it will be posted if known.]

Campaign materials: [Explain whether and where campaign materials may be displayed.]

Accessibility: [Include relevant accessibility information.]

Please confirm whether you will participate by [RSVP deadline] by replying to this email or contacting [Name, email, phone].

All participating candidates will receive the same format, expectations, and event information in advance. Confirmed candidates may be listed in public event promotion after the RSVP deadline.

Thank you for considering this invitation. We hope you will join residents for this important community conversation.

Sincerely,

[Name]

[Title/Role]

[Organization]

[Email]

[Phone]

Appendix B: Candidate confirmation template

Subject: Confirmation and details for [Forum Name] on [Date]

Dear [Candidate Name],

Thank you for confirming your participation in [Forum Name] on [Date].

This email confirms the details for the event.

Date: [Date]

Candidate arrival time: [Time]

Event time: [Start time – End time]

Location: [Venue and address / Online link]

Host: [Host organization(s)]

Moderator/MC: [Name, if confirmed]

Recording/livestream: [Details]

Contact on arrival: [Name and phone number]

Format:

[Briefly describe the format, including opening statements, question rounds, time limits, closing statements, meet-and-greet, community conversation, or other components.]

Candidate expectations:

All candidates will receive equal treatment and will be asked to follow the same expectations. Candidates are expected to respect the moderator or MC, other candidates, audience members, volunteers, and event staff. Personal attacks, interruptions, discriminatory language, and conduct that disrupts the event are not permitted.

Campaign materials:

[Explain whether campaign materials are permitted, where they may be displayed, and whether signs, banners, buttons, or literature are allowed inside the event space.]

Questions or discussion themes:

Questions or discussion themes will be [submitted in advance / submitted by audience members / selected by the moderator / developed by community partners / gathered through an activity]. The moderator or MC may combine similar questions and will ensure the discussion remains respectful and issue-focused.

Recording and media:

The event will be [recorded/livestreamed/not recorded]. By participating, candidates acknowledge that their remarks may be recorded, shared online, quoted, or covered by media.

Please let us know by [date] if you have any accessibility needs or questions about the event.

We look forward to welcoming you.

Sincerely,

[Name]

[Title/Role]

[Organization]

[Email]

[Phone]

Appendix C: Candidate decline or no-response language

If a candidate declines or does not respond, hosts can use neutral language in public materials.

"All registered candidates for [Office/Ward/Race] were invited to participate. The following candidates confirmed their participation: [Names]."

If a candidate declined:

"[Candidate Name] declined the invitation / was unable to attend."

If a candidate did not respond:

"[Candidate Name] did not respond by the RSVP deadline."

Avoid speculating about why a candidate is not attending.

Appendix D: Location checklist

Use this checklist when choosing a location.

Basic fit

- ☐ The space fits the purpose and format of the event.
- ☐ The space is neutral and welcoming.
- ☐ The space is large enough for the expected audience.
- ☐ The space is available at a time that works for the audience.
- ☐ The cost is manageable or can be shared with partners.
- ☐ The venue allows non-partisan election events.
- ☐ The venue allows livestreaming, recording, or media coverage if needed.

Accessibility

- ☐ The entrance is accessible.
- ☐ Washrooms are accessible.
- ☐ Seating can accommodate mobility devices and service animals.
- ☐ There is reserved seating for people who are Deaf, hard of hearing, or have low vision.
- ☐ Lighting is adequate and adjustable where possible.
- ☐ Sound quality is strong.
- ☐ Microphones are available.
- ☐ Captions, ASL interpretation, or interpretation can be supported if planned.
- ☐ There is a quiet or lower-stimulation area if possible.

Transportation and location

- The venue is easy to reach by transit, walking, cycling, or car.
- Parking or drop-off options are available where needed.
- The route from transit or parking to the entrance is clear and safe.
- The location is familiar or trusted by the audience.
- The location does not create unnecessary barriers for the people you most want to reach.

Room setup

- Candidates, moderator or MC, and audience can see and hear one another.
- There is enough space for movement.
- Aisles and exits are clear.
- Candidate tables or seating can be arranged fairly.
- There is space for campaign materials if permitted.
- There is space for registration, greeters, information tables, activities, food, or voting information.
- Food or refreshments can be served if planned.

Staffing and roles

- There is a designated event lead.
- There is a moderator, MC, or facilitator.
- There is a candidate liaison.
- There is a volunteer or floor lead.
- There is a technology lead if using microphones, slides, livestreaming, or recording.
- There is an online moderator if the event is hybrid or online.
- Volunteers know who has authority to make decisions if an issue arises.

Technology

- Reliable internet is available.
- There are enough outlets and extension cords.
- Microphones, speakers, projector, screen, laptop, camera, and livestream equipment are available if needed.
- The livestream or recording setup has been tested.
- Online participants can hear clearly.
- There is a plan for online questions and comment moderation.

Safety and disruption planning

- Exits are clearly marked and unobstructed.
- Organizers know who to contact in case of an emergency.
- Volunteers know their roles.
- The moderator or MC knows how to pause or redirect the event if needed.
- There is a plan for responding to disruptive behaviour.
- There is a private space where organizers can consult if a serious issue arises.

Media

- There is a designated place for media if needed.
- Photo and video expectations are clear.
- Audience members are informed if the event is being recorded or photographed.
- A media contact has been identified.



Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO)

155 University Ave., Suite 800, Toronto, ON M5H 3C6

Telephone direct: 416-971-9856
Fax: 416-971-6191
Toll-free in Ontario: 1-877-4-AMO-LAS (1-877-426-6527)
E-mail: amo@amo.on.ca
Website: amo.on.ca