



Hold your own **ROCK THE VOTE** Candidate Event

In Conjunction with



COMMISSION ON PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

The voices of young voters have been all but ignored by elected officials and candidates for decades. Now in 2008, with young voters going to the polls in record numbers and taking action on the ground to make this election our own, politicians are beginning to talk to and with us about the issues we care about.

By hosting your own candidate event, you can make sure candidates in your state or hometown pay attention to young people's issues and help shape the debate within your community this election season.

Rock the Vote is working with young adults around the country on "Talking Politics 2.0," our series of state and local candidate forums. **We want to work with you on one in your state!** Check out the "how-to" below and get in touch with us at forum@rockthevote.com if you'd like to hold a Rock the Vote candidate event this fall.

Hold a Rock the Vote Event

Rock the Vote has made it simple for anyone around the country to make their effort a Rock the Vote effort. Kick your event off right and license the Rock the Vote logo. This will give you permission to use the Rock the Vote name and logo on co-branded event materials and advertise *your* event with our name. Once your application has been approved, you're ready to go!

Rock the Vote is a nonpartisan organization. This means that we do not support or endorse candidates, nor do we participate in any activities that could benefit one party over another. There are many laws governing our work as a nonpartisan organization and we take our nonpartisanship seriously. *We cannot approve use of our logo for any partisan effort.*

To request the Rock the Vote logo, fill out the form at: <http://www.rockthevote.com/act-out/logo-request/>

Invite Participants

Who do you want at your event? Mayoral, state legislative, city council, or congressional races are great places to start. Remember, to hold a nonpartisan event you must invite all candidates for a particular office.

Be sure to invite your chosen candidates well ahead of the date you have in mind. Draft a letter to each potential participant that outlines your event proposal and explains why he or she should attend. Follow up with a phone call to each candidate's scheduling office.

If both candidates agree to the forum, you're in business! However, keep in mind that you and the candidates must all agree on the details and terms of the debate. Candidates will be particularly



interested in the site and format details. Ask each participant to name a representative who has the power to speak for him or her. Find out how to contact those representatives quickly, including when they are on the road.

Choose a Site

Securing a location for your event doesn't have to be an expensive proposition. Utilize the free or low-cost facilities within your own community, such as school auditoriums, civic centers, or theaters. Other possible locations include hotels and TV studios. But remember: make sure to pick a site that is as neutral as possible to both candidates.

If your event is going to be televised, find a site that is already well suited to the necessary technical equipment. Depending on how complex the production will be, you can solicit advice from a freelance producer or someone from a local television or radio station. Getting advice in advance from an expert will save you time, money, and headaches later.

When choosing a debate site, size is an immediate consideration. A stage for candidates, broadcasting equipment, and room for journalists will take up significant space. If you anticipate heavy media interest, you may want to provide journalists with a separate media center that they can work in both before and after the event. This area also provides room for post-debate interviews and commentary.

Choose a Format

Your candidate event can take on almost any form you can think up. However, there are a number of available models to guide you. The top three most common formats are a debate, a forum, and a discussion.

Debate

In a debate, candidates are on stage at the same time and interact directly with each other. There are several different debate formats; the most widely known include the town hall meeting (audience members ask the questions), the panel (a number of pre-selected individuals question the candidates), and the single moderator (one person asks the questions). Each type has its own set of benefits and drawbacks. While town hall and panel discussions encourage greater participation and involvement, the single moderator tends to focus attention more firmly on the candidates and their positions.

Forum

At a candidate forum, speakers answer questions directly from audience members, panelists, or a moderator but do not directly engage with each other. Speakers may be on stage simultaneously, or at separate times.

Discussion

At this type of event, candidates sit down with a group of young adults one at a time and have a discussion. Rather than follow the traditional question-and-answer format, discussions have a more conversational tone and involve back-and-forth exchanges between the candidate and the participants.

If your format requires a moderator, pick a person that is familiar with the issues and candidates, such as a journalist or professor. Journalists are likely to be more experienced with handling the technical



requirements of a broadcast setting. Above all, choose a moderator or panelists whom you and the event participants trust to be professional and fair. If you decide to organize your event as a town hall, make sure that your audience is as balanced and unbiased as possible. Try to distribute tickets evenly to supporters of each candidate and seek out undecided, independent voters.

Other formatting issues to consider include:

- **Topic**
What do you want your debate to be about? It can be wide-ranging or confined to just a few issues that are relevant to young voters. Much like the rest of the electorate, top youth issues in 2008 include jobs and the economy, the war in Iraq, health care, and education. You should also consider addressing local issues that are relevant to your community.
- **Length**
How long should the debate be? This can depend on a number of factors, including scheduling constraints, the number of participants, and whether it will be broadcast. The presidential debates are typically ninety minutes.
- **Opening and Closing Statements**
Will the candidates have opening and closing statements? Prepared statements reduce the amount of time for questions, so try limiting them to two or three minutes each.
- **Time Limits**
Should time limits for questions and answers be set? The lengths of both will determine how many topics can be addressed during the debate. For example, questions could be limited to twenty seconds, with two minutes allotted for answers. If you do opt for time limits, select a responsible person to keep time and establish an easy system to let the moderator and participants know when their time is up. Remember, mistakes in timing can lead to claims of unfairness later.
- **Order of Speaking**
Who speaks first and who finishes up? Try to use an easy and fair selection process, such as flipping a coin or drawing straws.

Once the format has been finalized and agreed to, put everything in writing and distribute to all parties.

Invite the Audience

If you are going to have a live audience for your event, deciding who attends is important. As soon as a debate is announced, many people will want tickets. Decide on audience size and ticket distribution early and stick to those guidelines. Will the event be open to the public? Will it be limited to a certain group or demographic, such as young adults under 30? Establish a ticket policy and enforce rules of audience conduct during the forum. Remember that time taken up with audience reaction is time taken away from the candidates and their views.

Make sure to consider the logistics of having a live audience at your event site. The setup of your debate hall can greatly affect how noisy things might get. Uncarpeted floors, for instance, can magnify every audience move from applause to sneezes. The larger the audience, the greater the potential for noise. If you anticipate heckling or other disruptive behavior, make sure to have adequate security on hand. Make it clear to ticket-holders in advance if they can bring cameras or other electronic equipment; flash devices



can be distracting to candidates and TV camera crews. Finally, make sure the size of the audience and the seating plans are consistent with safe use of the hall, and that all relevant fire and building codes are met.

And remember: once your event is scheduled, send the details to forum@rockthevote.com. We'll work with you to connect with other Rock the Vote people in your area that might be interested in volunteering or attending your debate.

Involve the Media

Political debates and candidate forums are news events, so you must consider the media in your planning. The press is an excellent promotional tool that can be used to generate excitement and interest in your event.

Once the details of the debate or forum have been finalized, write a press release and distribute it to local media outlets. Explore promotional opportunities with nearby college newspapers and radio stations. Schedule interviews to preview the forum and discuss the topics you hope to cover with the candidates. Create a website for the debate to publicize the latest news.

Think about issuing credentials to journalists who want to cover the event. This will allow you to identify and control the number of journalists who have access to the event site and to fairly allocate space. Consider the needs of different types of media. Is the event going to be televised? Try getting help from a TV producer who can assist with camera placement, lighting, and power sources. Will there be still photographers in the hall? Designate where they should be and make sure their equipment is not distracting.

After the event, many journalists will want to question the candidates. The media center described earlier can become the area where this exchange takes place. Post-debate commentary can be lengthy, so it is important to find a location where it does not interfere with the process of cleaning up the hall.

Plan and Budget

Hosting a candidate event requires a considerable amount of planning. However, early and thorough preparation will save you from many problems down the line.

Taking the time to work out a budget is critical. Keep these possible expenses in mind:

- **Debate Hall**
Can you use a facility that will be provided free of charge, or will it have to be rented?
- **Furniture/Stage**
Do you need to provide a raised platform and podiums for the speakers, desks and tables for the moderator/panelists, or chairs for the audience?
- **Electrical**
Will you need to obtain microphones, additional lights, or extra power sources? If your event is going to be broadcast, decide what equipment you will provide and what media representatives will bring.
- **Printed Materials**
Will you print programs, posters, media credentials, or audience tickets?



- **Labor**
Will you require professional help to handle equipment?
- **Security**
Will you need to provide security if you are using a facility after its normal business hours?
- **Cassettes/Transcripts**
Do you plan to offer video, audio, or written transcripts of the debate?

However, a number of these costs can be reduced or entirely eliminated with creative planning. Careful location scouting can reduce the need for furniture, staging, and electrical equipment. If you plan to produce printed materials, consider soliciting sponsors for the event to help offset your costs. These sponsors can be recognized in your printed and electronic promotional materials, as well as on-site. Finding politically-engaged volunteers will also save you in labor and security. You can charge for tapes and transcripts to cover the cost of producing them.

Once you've decided to hold an event, reach out to your local television stations early. Let them know that you are planning a debate or forum and ask if they would be interested in broadcasting all or part of the event. Having your event broadcast is an important consideration as you select your debate hall, decide on the size of the audience, and invite journalists.

Think about the internet as you're planning. A website can be used to promote the date, time, and location of your event, solicit volunteers and donors, order tickets, acknowledge sponsors, post transcripts, and receive post-debate feedback. You can also reach out to local schools, businesses, and civic groups to help promote your event on their sites. Don't limit yourself – the web provides endless options to make your forum unique. You might even consider webcasting your event, hosting an internet forum, or soliciting questions for the candidates on your website.

Follow Up

Once the debate is over, your job as the host is fairly simple. Make sure your event site is restored to normal, and that any borrowed or rented equipment is returned. If you decided to produce transcripts or tapes of the debate, you will be providing journalists with a valuable tool. The sooner you can transcribe the debate and distribute copies, the more useful they will be. Send thank you notes to all participants, as well as any partners or sponsors.

Finally, let Rock the Vote know about your success! Send photos, video, and any press coverage generated to forum@rockthevote.com. We'll put it up on our website to show how young people across the country are taking charge and shaping the debate in their communities.

Keep in touch, stay involved, and volunteer with Rock the Vote!

Sources

"Guide to Hosting Your Own Debate" by the Commission on Presidential Debates

"Organizing Speeches and Debates by Local Candidates or Stand-ins for Candidates" by Shirley Jackson