



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS®  
of Richardson

## **Candidate Forum Process**

Each year, the members of the League of Women Voters of Richardson (LWV-R) meet to plan their annual calendar of activities. During this planning meeting, we look at upcoming elections and discuss which races will be particularly important to local voters. Usually, these include Richardson City Council and RISD Board of Trustees races, and may also include races such as State Board of Education and State Legislature, for example. As the elections get closer, we decide whether or not to hold candidate forums for those races. Sometimes our forums are cosponsored by other local Leagues and/or by local organizations.

When the filing period ends for the selected races, we contact all candidates to invite them to participate in our VOTERS GUIDES and candidate forums.

In recent years, all of our forums have followed the same format, although the use of this format is not required by the League of Women Voters of the United States (LWVUS). We have found that the format we use allows members of the public to hear the candidates address a wide variety of issues, yet maintains a level of civility and decorum that might otherwise be lacking.

All candidates on the ballot are asked to participate in our printed and online VOTERS GUIDES.

Generally, only candidates running for a contested office are included in the question-and-answer portion of our candidate forums, whereas all candidates (including those who are unopposed) are invited to give closing statements. The reasons for this are threefold:

1. Voters must decide which candidate to vote for in each contested race. Unopposed races don't require voters to make a choice. Since the amount of time available in a forum is limited, we prefer to allocate the majority of that time to the races in which voters will be deciding between or among candidates.
2. Many years ago, we sometimes included unopposed candidates in the question-and-answer portions of our candidate forums. Since most unopposed candidates are incumbents who have already served in office, they tend to be quite knowledgeable about the job. We found that the unopposed incumbents tended to answer questions in great detail, explaining programs and policies of the elected body on which they served. Inexperienced candidates then tended to use the incumbents' explanations as a base for their own answers, even if they had previously not known much about the programs and policies addressed. Voters need to be able to evaluate candidates based on what they know, but also on what they don't know. An inexperienced candidate may be the best person for the job, but should be able to demonstrate that based on his or her own responses to questions rather than on information provided by an unopposed candidate.

3. In a VOTERS GUIDE, there is no way to guarantee that the candidates themselves have written the responses to questions. In a League-sponsored candidate forum, candidates in opposed races agree to respond to questions on a wide variety of topics, without access to notes or electronic devices. They do not know the questions beforehand, and they do not have aides or handlers assisting them in their answers. Again, voters who need to decide between contested candidates can assess the candidates' knowledge by listening to their responses to questions.

In accordance with guidelines set out by LWVUS, we will only include a particular contested race in a League-sponsored candidate forum if at least two candidates for that race agree to participate. If only one candidate in a contested race agrees to participate, or is the only person to appear at the forum for that race, we will not include that race in the candidate forum.

In agreeing to participate in an LWV-R forum, candidates agree in writing to abide by certain ground rules, including the following:

- Candidates will show respect to each other at all times.
  - Candidates will not interrupt one another nor talk over one another.
  - Candidates will refrain from personal attacks or charges.

In LWV-R forums, a moderator asks questions and makes sure that candidates adhere to the guidelines they agreed to follow when accepting our invitation to participate. Questions are submitted in writing in one of three ways:

1. Questions may be submitted by the public by email in the weeks leading up to the forum. We publicize this option on our website, in press releases, and on flyers advertising our forums. These questions are transcribed verbatim onto file cards and are treated the same way as questions submitted at the forum.
2. Questions may be submitted by the audience at the forum. We provide file cards and pencils to audience members.
3. Members of the League of Women Voters of Richardson typically write a few "starter questions" on a variety of pertinent topics, which are transcribed onto file cards and mixed in with questions received by the public. The purpose of these questions is to ensure that there will be enough questions available at the beginning of the forum in the event that the audience has not yet had time to write questions. We make every effort to write starter questions that are general in nature, and are not directed at particular candidates. Usually, the screeners do not know which questions are the starter questions, and these questions are not given preference over questions from the public.

We normally use three question screeners at forums. Usually, one is a League member who is experienced at question screening, one is a League member who may be less experienced, and the third is a person who could be either a League member or a representative of a cosponsoring organization. No one working on the forum, including the moderator and screeners, may be affiliated with any candidate's campaign.

All submitted questions are given to the screeners at the forum. Questions are screened according to a publication of the League of Women Voters of Texas entitled "A Guide to Candidates Forums for Local Leagues." This publication can be found online at <http://www.lwvtexas.org/files/PublicationsGuideToCandidateForums2011.pdf>.

According to this Guide, question screeners may do the following:

- Eliminate or rephrase questions that are inappropriate or poorly written.
- Reword questions addressed to an individual candidate so they apply to all candidates.
- Group questions that are similar or are about the same subject, leaving more time for other questions.
- Write reserve questions to be used if the audience does not submit enough questions to fill the time allotted.
- Prioritize questions so that the more important ones are first.

Our main goals in screening are to prevent:

- repetition (so a variety of topics can be covered); and
- inappropriate questions (those that refer to an individual candidate, are addressed to only one candidate, are not applicable to the office, and/or contain offensive language).

There are a number of reasons why a particular question may not be asked at a forum:

1. Too many questions may have been submitted for the allotted time. Typically, our forums last 90 minutes, with 10- 20 minutes taken up with opening remarks and candidates' closing statements. As many as 60 questions have been submitted at our forums, but, depending on the number of candidates, there is only time to ask around 10 to 20 questions.
2. Some questions submitted by the audience are illegible, or are so poorly worded that the screeners cannot determine what issue the questioner is addressing. We make every effort to figure out the questioner's intent, but sometimes we cannot.
3. Some questions address issues that have nothing to do with the office for which the candidates are running. For instance, we sometimes get a question for school board candidates about issues that are actually decided on by the State Legislature or Texas Education Agency. If a question addresses an issue that is not relevant to the office for which the candidates are running, we will look for another question on a topic that is relevant.
4. Occasionally, a questioner will first make a statement of fact or present a statistic, then base the question upon the fact or statistic. Sometimes the fact or statistic may be quite detailed, or may seem to be exaggerated or untrue. If the screeners are not familiar with the topic and/or cannot verify the fact or statistic as being true, the question may be set aside. Instead, a more general question on a similar topic may be substituted.

A lot of thought goes into the process of holding a League-sponsored forum. We make every effort to be fair to all candidates, and to make sure that everyone behaves in a civil manner. We give the public the opportunity to submit questions about topics that interest them, while trying to ensure that those questions are both clear and fair. Our overarching goal is to provide the public with a means to hear from the candidates, in their own words, about their stands on a variety of issues.

If you are interested in becoming a member of the League of Women Voters of Richardson and helping with the production of our VOTERS GUIDES and candidate forums, we welcome your participation. Membership is open to all men and women. A membership form can be found at <http://www.lwvrichardson.org/join.html>.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact us at [voterservice@lwvrichardson.org](mailto:voterservice@lwvrichardson.org).