



The Minnesota Participation Project: Nonpartisan Nonprofit Voter Mobilization

The Minnesota Participation Project is an initiative of the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits with support from Grassroots Solutions

Candidate Questionnaires and Voter Guides

As a part of your voter education efforts, you may consider putting together a voter guide to educate the public on each candidate's positions. As always, nonprofits can and should do this type of work, but should do it in a way that is nonpartisan and does not favor a candidate. There are two steps to creating a voter guide: 1) sending out your questionnaires, also called surveys, and 2) compiling and publishing the responses.

Key points for developing your questionnaire:

- Select questions that cover a wide variety of issues.
- Select questions that matter to the entire electorate.
- Questions that focus on issues of importance to your organization may be included so long as they are not biased, i.e., not worded so as to indicate the "right" response or otherwise reflect your organization's agenda.
- Consider whether you want the candidate's responses to be yes/no, support/oppose, multiple choice, or in an open-ended, written format.
- Give all candidates for the office an equal opportunity to participate.
- Wait until after the filing deadline for candidacy before sending out your questionnaire.
- In general, if you think the question is biased or will elicit a response that will clearly indicate your preference for or against a particular candidate, you probably shouldn't ask it.

After you have determined the questions to be included in the candidate survey, it's time to send them out and wait for responses. Candidates are becoming more and more reluctant to participate in questionnaires, so a good tip is to talk to the candidate or campaign manager before you send it out, and get their confirmation that they will fill it out and return it. Once you have received the responses to your questionnaire, it's time to put together the voter guide.

Key points in developing your voter guide:

- If you choose to ask questions in an open-ended, written format you should:
 - Limit the number of words.
 - Print the candidate's answers in full – do not paraphrase or summarize!
- Design a voter guide that doesn't highlight or accentuate one candidate over another.
- Your guide should not suggest how people should vote.
- Do not score or rate the candidates' responses
- Make your guide available to the general public

Helpful Hints from the Alliance for Justice* :

In evaluating all such questionnaires, the IRS mainly tries to decide if the overall impression given to the reader by the selection and presentation of issues “evidences a bias or preference with respect to the views of any candidate or group of candidates.” Consider these examples:

- The Friends of the Parks asks the candidates for mayor one question: “What are your views on the operation of our city parks?” The answers, limited to 100 words, are printed in full and distributed to the public

Arguably, this is a nonpartisan public service, particularly since voters are unlikely to learn the candidates’ views on the parks any other way. The question contains no bias and does not reflect any organizational agenda. Hopefully, the IRS would agree, even though the issue is narrow.

If the Friends instead asked, “What will you do to increase funding for the city parks?” then the questionnaire would be biased, because it would suggest what answer the organization would prefer to hear.

- The Progressive Forum poses a broad range of questions to candidates for U.S. Senator, asking for a single-word answer: “Support” or “Oppose”
 - “Do you support a woman’s right to choose to have an abortion?”
 - “Will you oppose repeal of the Endangered Species Act?”
 - “Do you favor cutting school lunch funds?”

Such questions reflect a particular agenda, and the answers are likely to indicate to the voter who the organization thinks is a better, more progressive, candidate. The IRS would not approve.

On the other hand, if the Forum stated the same questions more neutrally (“What is your position on abortion?”) and mixed them in with questions about sending troops to Bosnia, repealing the gasoline tax, raising the minimum wage and increasing jail terms for child molesters, the nonpartisan informational value of the questionnaire could overcome any suggestion that it was designed to favor certain candidates over others.

*Examples are courtesy of the Alliance for Justice, *The Rules of the Game: An Election Year Legal Guide for Nonprofit Organizations*. 1996. www.afj.org.