



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 Forum Turnout Toolbox

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and

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Turnout: How the Minnesota Participation Project Can Help

The Minnesota Participation Project is here to help you ensure that your forum is well attended. Specifically, MPP will provide you with concrete steps, tools, and techniques that will increase your chances of high turnout at your candidate forum.

Many groups stage events with high hopes for a big crowd, but end up disappointed by low turnout. Low turnout leaves people demoralized, disengaged, and disconnected. While many groups are great at planning the event logistics in terms of getting appropriate space, inviting speakers, and producing flyers, very few devote time and energy to turnout. This is a fatal error, because low turnout to an event is worse for your group and your issue than no event at all.

The following are some suggestions on how we can help you with your turnout goals.

Planning Turnout

MPP can help you brainstorm ideas for:

- Persuading others to help turn people out
- Identifying groups who can help spread the word about the forum
- Getting participant commitment and follow-through
- Reaching beyond your base for participation in the forum
- Developing a turnout timeline

Troubleshooting

MPP can help you get around obstacles by:

- Formulating strategies for quick, cost-effective communication
- Leveraging existing organizing resources to extend your reach
- Helping come up with a “Plan B” when things aren’t going as expected
- Prioritizing turnout activities for highest impact
- Responding to crises regarding turnout

Tools Development

MPP can support your turnout efforts by:

- Providing this Turnout Packet
- Reviewing your materials with an eye towards increasing turnout
- Drafting call scripts for recruitment and follow-up
- Developing talking points for you and your allied organizations
- Offering sample timelines and checklists for your turnout strategy


Tackling Turnout: The Ten-Step Turnout Plan

This step-by-step plan will help you execute clear, effective turnout strategies.

Four Weeks
Before Event

1. **Create a team.** Successful turnout is much more attainable if the work is shared. Recruit 3-5 people that you can count on to help you work on turnout.
2. **Set a turnout goal.** Your turnout goal can help you prioritize and focus, and will help you determine whether you need more people on your team. For these Candidate Forums, good turnout would be 45 people attending. To get 45 people attending, you should recruit **double** that number—90 people. You can use people you recruit to do this by asking those who commit to attending to then commit to bringing a friend. MPP can help you set goals and identify other tactics to meet them.
3. **Brainstorm a list of possible audiences.** An “audience” should be made up of people *who likely support your issue(s)* and might come to the forum. Make a list of groups that work on issue(s) similar to yours. You can work with MPP to identify specific audiences.
4. **Call contact people for each group on the list.** Building and leveraging personal connections is the key to good turnout. Your brainstorm list can be the foundation of your outreach. The easiest way to do this is to divide the list amongst the group. If your group is small, you may need to prioritize the list first so that the most potentially responsive groups are highest on the list. Use talking points to guide your conversation. The goals for this call are:
 - To let them know about the forum and why it’s important to have high turnout.
 - To ask them if they have a newsletter, email listserv, or upcoming events or trainings, and ask them to promote the forum using those communication vehicles.
 - To ask them to attend the event.
 - To ask them to personally recruit a certain number of people (5-10) from their networks (personal or professional) to attend the forum.
 - To get full contact information, including email addresses.

Three Weeks
Before Event

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5. **Mail promotional brochures and flyers.** As much as possible, target your mailing to those audiences you most want to attend. For example, flyers in supermarkets are less effective than flyers in physician clinics.
 6. **Send supporting materials to allies.** Provide a newsletter/listserv sample article (there is one in this packet) and some talking points to all contacts who agreed to help spread the word. This will make it easy for them to drop it into their newsletter, email update, or remarks at the beginning or end of a training or event. Try to get them to commit to a deadline date (send the email by x date) if possible. Know the drop dates of their newsletters. Thank them for their help.
 7. **Build and obtain lists.** Keep track of the people who agree to attend the forum and the people who agree to personally recruit others to attend. If possible, get membership and volunteer lists from allies.

Two Weeks
Before Event

8. **Make confirmation calls.** Contact everyone who committed to attend and/or help spread the word; again, divvy up the list with your team. In the calls, thank your allies for their help and make sure they have what they need. Remind them of what they said they would do. Emphasize why their help is making a difference—for them and for you. (“Candidates will hear from your members about your issues at the forum because you’ve helped us mobilize. We want to have a lot of people at the forum so that candidates understand that the voters care about our issues.” or “It’s important that candidates see that everyday people care about these issues. The fact that you will be at the forum and are bringing your neighbor and your niece will send that message loud and clear.”)

9. **Make recruitment calls.** If you obtained lists and you have the resources, call through them to ask the people on the list to attend the forum. A group of 3-8 people with a script and a few phones can make up to 200 calls in a two hour period. This can greatly increase your chances of high turnout, because people respond best to personal contact.

If you didn’t obtain lists, recruit your family members, friends, and neighbors to attend the forum. In many cases, you will find that the same “pitch” you would use on a stranger will work on people you know.

One Week
Before Event

10. **Mail reminder postcards or emails.** Particularly for those who agree to attend the forum or recruit others to do so, multiple reminders greatly increase the chances that they’ll follow through. Don’t leave friends or family members out of reminders; they may know you personally, but they still have busy lives.

Day of Forum

Greet and thank, Greet and thank, Greet and thank

Inviting the Candidates

This handout will help you gain a commitment from candidates to appear at your forum.

Groups who want candidates for elected office to attend their local event often find themselves putting planning on hold while they try to get a commitment from candidates. Ironically, the more focus the group puts on getting people *besides* the candidate to attend—namely, voters and press—the more likely it is that the candidate will make the time to come. Consider these tips for inviting electoral candidates to your event:

1. **Start building a crowd.** Develop and follow-through on an intense turnout plan, so that you can deliver the crowd you promise to candidates.
2. **Schedule the event.** In selecting a date, think about scheduling it near other community events that make it more likely that the candidate will be in the home district. If there are community festivals, for example, schedule your forum for the day before or after.
3. **Prepare to invite candidates.** Candidates are motivated to attend events that will expose them to voters that they can win over. Therefore:
 - *Reference your crowd.* When you invite the candidate, be sure to emphasize that your coalition has a large base (number of members for each participating group, for example). Don't be afraid to mention the ways in which you will be ensuring high attendance, or the high participation numbers you've seen from your membership in the past.
 - *Invite press.* Let the candidate know about all the media outlets that are invited to the event.
 - *Use the candidate's opposition.* Let candidates know the status of their opponents—that they have been invited, and as soon as it is confirmed, that they will be attending.
4. **Call the candidate.** Invite them by phone, and let them know that you'll be sending a formal written invitation in the mail. Give information, but don't stop there—ask for a commitment.
5. **Send a written invitation.** Provide information about the event, the expected turnout, the invited press, your coalition and allied groups, and all event logistics.

6. **Connect with the candidate's campaign.** Try to find someone on your planning team who has a connection to someone on the candidate's campaign committee, such as the volunteer campaign manager or treasurer. Have them call their contact and ask for their help in ensuring that the candidate participates.
7. **Make a follow up call.** A week after the written invitation, call the candidate to get—or confirm—a commitment. In the call, emphasize that you are conducting intense outreach and that there will be a crowd at the event.
8. **Continue crowd-building.** As you work on the candidate, stay focused on your turnout plan. Keep calling the candidate until you get their commitment, and give the candidate information that reinforces the message that they will have access to many voters if they participate.
9. **Confirm.** Once the candidate has committed, send a confirmation letter with a summary of the event details. Thank them in advance for participating.
10. **Thank them again.** Send a thank you to the candidates after the event.

Important note: In order for your candidate forum to comply with the law, you must invite *all* candidates from every major party for each race, and pursue commitments from each of them with equal diligence. In the event that there are not a majority of confirmed candidates for each race or if all of the confirmed candidates are from one party a week before the event, your nonprofit will have to make a final decision about whether or not to cancel the forum.

Sample Talking Points: Candidate Forums

This handout provides you with an example of effective talking points to use in communicating about your event.

Organizing a community event calls for repeated contacts with people you may or may not know personally. You will likely be making this contact to ask people to help in some way. Therefore, your communication needs to be both informative and persuasive.

Talking points can help you organize your thoughts and communicate your needs in a clear, concise, and compelling way, and will help you ensure that you give the same information to everyone you reach.

Talking points should build from one point to the next and should be in everyday language that's easily understood. They should be specific and to-the-point. Consider using these talking points in informing people about the candidate forum, and persuading people to get involved:

1. An election year gives voters more than an opportunity to vote; it also provides a chance to educate candidates for office and demonstrate strong grassroots support for issues.
2. That's why a coalition of (focus of forum) groups is co-sponsoring Town Meetings and Candidate Forums throughout Minnesota this fall.
3. The goals of the candidate forums are to:
 - a. Provide a way for voters who care about (focus of forum) issues to find out where the candidates stand on those issues
 - b. Demonstrate that (focus of forum) are high voter priorities
 - c. Energize and educate candidates and voters in the community about (focus of forum) related issues
4. It's important that lots of people come to the candidate forums so that candidates and the community recognize that a significant number of votes are cast with (focus of forum) issues in mind.
5. The candidate forum in your area is being held at: [location] on [date and time].
6. We need your help to make the forum a success. You can:
 - a. Help spread the word by distributing flyers and including messages in newsletters, email lists, and upcoming events
 - b. Attend the forum and ask a (focus of forum) related question

- c. Bring friends, family members, colleagues, neighbors, and other community members to the forum
- d. Encourage others attending the forum to ask (focus of forum) related questions of the candidates

Sample Phone Script: Recruiting Organizational Support

This handout will help you get turnout help from other like-minded organizations.

Getting good turnout for a forum often means enlisting the aid of other like-minded organizations who can help mobilize their networks to participate. This means lots of phone calls to organizations to ask for their support. One way to make those phone calls easier is to use a phone script that incorporates your basic talking points into a specific call to action.

As the call culminates in specific requests, don't be afraid to ask for more than one thing. Start small, and continue to ask for different kinds of support so that you are leveraging this contact as much as possible. A sample phone script follows:

“Hello, I am [first name] and I am a volunteer/employee with (Insert your group name).”

“We’re hosting a town meeting and candidate forum in [state location]. Do have a minute to talk with me?” or, if identified from one of the Associations,

“We’re teaming up with (Insert name of group you are partnering with) to host a town meeting and candidate forum in [state location]. Do you have a minute to talk with me?”

[if no, ask for a more convenient time]

“This election year gives us a chance to educate candidates for the state legislature about (focus of forum) related issues. I’m sure you’d agree that it’s important that candidates know about the (focus of forum) issues that affect our community, right?”

[wait for “yes”]

“These candidate forums provide a way for members of groups like yours to find out where candidates stand on the (focus of forum) issues that matter to them. It’s important to have lots of people at the forums, because high turnout demonstrates to candidates that (focus of forum) issues are a high priority to voters. That’s why I’m calling you today. Would you be willing to help us?”

[Usually, the response will be some variation on “That depends on what you want me to do”. If there is a definite “no” answer, thank them for their time and end the call.]

***“You can help us with participation. Can you:
[With each request, thank them if they say yes, and move on to the next if they say no.]***

- ***Attend the forum yourself?***
- ***Bring two people with you to the forum?***
- ***Promote the forum in your newsletter?***
- ***Send an email alert about the forum to your members?***
- ***Recruit 5 [10, 15] people from your group to come to the forum?***
- ***Help us make reminder calls to people who say they will attend the event?***

Thank you for your help. I'll be sending you some information about the forum. Can I confirm your contact information?”

Get phone number, mailing address, and **email address**

“Again, thanks for your help. Someone will follow up with you in [state amount of time]. “

End call.

(Print on Letterhead)

**[CITY] Town Meeting *and* Candidate Forum
for a
(Insert your issue here ex: Healthy) Minnesota
[DATE & LOCATION]**

6:30 p.m. – Town Meeting

Attend an educational town meeting for information about Minnesota's lack of (focus of forum).

7:00 p.m. – Candidate Forum

Find out how your candidates stand on (focus of forum) issues. The forums will let you, the voter, ask questions of candidates in a moderated forum.

If you plan on attending, please RSVP to 1-877-277-2999

Sponsored by:

The Candidate Forums are educational in nature, designed to inform the public as to how a broad range of (focus of forum) issues is being addressed during this election cycle. The forums, content and conduct are strictly neutral, and no endorsement for (or against) any candidate by the sponsoring organizations is intended or to be inferred.

More information about the Town Meetings and Candidate Forums is available online at:
(Your website or email address).

Candidate Forums: Sample Newsletter Article

This sample article can be placed in a newsletter or formatted into an email to encourage people to come to the candidate forums.

This election year, you as a voter have more than an opportunity to vote; you have a chance to educate candidates about the health and tobacco issues that are important to you. That's why a coalition of health groups are teaming up with Minnesotans for Affordable Health Care to sponsor a Town Meeting and Candidate Forum in {name of community} on {date of event}.

Candidate forums are a great way for you to find out where the candidates stand on the health issues that affect our community. It's important to demonstrate to the candidates that people like you vote with those issues in mind.

To make sure that the candidates pay attention, our community needs you to attend the candidate forum. Mark your calendar and bring two friends to show strength in numbers for a healthy community!

[insert name of community] Town Meeting and Candidate Forum
[insert date, time, location, and contact information]

Sponsored by Healthy Kids Minnesota, an initiative of Minnesotans for Affordable Health Care, the American Heart Association, the American Lung Association and the Minnesota Medical Association. Additional sponsors include the Children's Defense Fund-Minnesota, Education Minnesota, Joint Religious Legislative Council, Medical Alley and the Minnesota Rural Health Care Association.

The Candidate Forums are educational in nature, designed to inform the public as to how a broad range of health issues is being addressed during this election cycle. The forums, content and conduct are strictly neutral, and no endorsement for (or against) any candidate by the sponsoring organizations is intended or to be inferred.

Recruiting Volunteers by Phone: Strategies for Success

This handout gives you some tips for successful phone recruitment.

1. **Use a phone script** provided, or write your own. Go over the phone script and practice a few times. Have your materials at your fingertips: answers to frequently asked questions, contact information, blank paper, a pen, your script, and names and addresses of the people you're going to call.
2. **Work in questions** you know they'll agree with. The first question should come early, and be followed by one or two more. This establishes a base level of agreement between you, and helps you avoid talking for a long time without gauging their response. The sample phone scripts in this packet are written this way.
3. **Ask questions with a tone that implies agreement**—don't let your voice convey uncertainty.
4. Keep it simple and conversational. **Be yourself.** As much as possible, make the phone script fit your style.
5. **Tell them why it's important.** Don't leave them with the feeling that recruiting volunteers is an end unto itself—tell them specifically why you need them.
6. **Ask.** Many people actually make the call, but never come out and ask people for a commitment. You must ask—specifically!--in order to get the answer.
7. **Be prepared for roadblocks.** "I don't have time" is a common response. Reiterate the importance of the event.
8. **Make it personal.** Describe why it's important to you, and, if you know the person, why you think it should matter to them to get involved.
9. **Try to leave the door open.** If you get a sense that somebody is undecided but you can't get them to commit at that time, ask if you can check in with them in a few days. Send some follow up material, and call them back.
10. **Follow up.** If somebody says "yes", make sure that you follow up with him or her within a few days. Send written information that confirms their commitment. Make a reminder call a day or two before the event.

Sample Phone Script: Recruiting Attendees for Candidate Forums

This handout can guide your phone calls to community members whom you want to attend the candidate forum.

Earned media, flyers, brochures, newsletter articles, and email alerts are all good ways to get the word out about an event like a candidate forum. However, successful turnout relies most heavily on personal contact. This often means lots of phone calls to friends, colleagues, family members, membership lists, and volunteer lists to ask people to attend. One way to make those phone calls easier is to use a phone script that incorporates your basic talking points into a specific call to action.

A sample phone script follows:

“Hello, I am [first name] and I am a volunteer with Minnesotans for Affordable Health Care. I am not calling to ask for money. Do have a minute to talk with me? [if no, ask for a more convenient time]

We’re hosting a town meeting and candidate forum in [state location, date, and time]. “

or, if identified from one of the Associations,

“We’re teaming up with Minnesotans for Affordable Health Care to host a town meeting and candidate forum in [state location].

This election year gives us a chance to educate candidates for the state legislature about health care related issues. Are there any health related issues that you care about?” [listen to issues]

“Like you, a lot of people I’m talking with tonight care about affordable health care, prescription drug costs, and the health of the state’s children, just to name a few examples. I’m sure you’d agree that it’s important that candidates know about these kinds of health issues, right?”

[wait for “yes”]

“These candidate forums provide a way for everyday people like you and me to find out where the candidates stand on the health issues that affect our community. I want whoever gets elected to pay attention to the health issues that matter to me...Don’t you?”

[wait for “yes”]

“It’s important to have lots of people at the forums, because high turnout demonstrates to candidates that health issues are a high priority to us voters. That’s why I’m calling you today. Can I count on you to come to the forum?”

If yes:

Thank you so much! Can you also bring two people with you to the forum? Maybe a couple of family members, friends or neighbors?

“Thank you for your help. I’ll be sending you some information about the forum. I’d like to confirm your contact information?”

Get phone number, mailing address, and **email address**

“Again, thanks for your help. Someone will call to remind you [state amount of time] before the event.”

End call.

Sample Phone Script: Confirmation and Reminder Calls

This handout can guide your reminder calls to committed attendees.

The confirmation and reminder call is likely the most important call that you can make. Be sure to set aside time in the few days prior to the event to make reminder calls to those who said they'd attend.

“Hello. This is [state name], and I’m a volunteer with [state organization]. I’m calling to remind you about the Town Meeting and Candidate Forum that you are attending this coming [day, date, and time]. We are counting on your being there!”

It’s important that we have a lot of people at the forum so that the candidates understand that health care issues are important to our community. Thanks for helping us educate and inform our candidates for office about these issues. In addition to your presence, we are hoping to have even more people come to the forum. Can you bring two friends with you?”

If yes, ***“Thank you. That will make an even bigger impact.”***

If no, ***“Your presence will really have an impact.”***

The forum is located at [state location]. Do you have any questions for me about the time or location?

If yes, answer questions.

Can we count on you to be there on [state day of event]?

If yes, ***Great!***

If no with some flexibility in the reason: ***I hope you’ll reconsider. This is a great opportunity to have a lively dialogue with the candidates about these issues.***

If no with no flexibility: ***I hope you’ll encourage a family member or friend to go for you instead. Can you do that?***

If yes: ***Thank you so much.***

If no: ***Thank you for your time.***

If you need more information, [give contact information].

Thanks again! End Call.