

Candidate Questionnaire

Your Organization’s Role During Election Year

During election year, nonprofit organizations can play an important role to help educate voters and foster discussion through nonpartisan electoral advocacy. A candidate questionnaire is an easy tool you can use to effectively ensure that your organization’s mission and issue areas are addressed during election year, while adhering to all 501(c)3 rules.

Candidate Questionnaire Tips and Guidelines

The most important thing to remember when composing a candidate questionnaire is: keep it unbiased and send it to all candidates for the specified elected position! Candidate questionnaires are not meant to persuade voters to select one candidate over the other, but rather to impartially inform them about each candidate’s stance on various issues, including but not limited to those important to your organization.



In order to ensure that a candidate questionnaire is unbiased, you **MUST**:

- Distribute the questionnaire to all candidates for a particular office, asking them the exact same questions
- Give candidates the same opportunity to respond (eg: the same length of time to reply to you). Don’t be afraid to follow-up or send a reminder!
- Phrase questions in a neutral manner. Questions cannot imply that there is a “right” or “wrong” answer or that the organization supports or opposes a candidate based on the given answer
- Use open-ended questions. Avoid asking questions that can be answered in a yes/no manner; always give the candidate the opportunity to explain him or herself.
- Include questions that reflect a broad range of issues. Remember: questionnaires that have a narrow focus can be interpreted as biased as it may favor candidates whose responses align with the organization’s views.
- Keep it short! Candidates are busy and the longer a questionnaire is, the less likely you’ll be to get a response (keep it at 5–10 questions).



And remember that you **MUST NOT**:

- Ask a candidate to pledge their support for a cause (for example, you cannot say “if elected, would you agree to support all early childhood education programs...”)
- Compare and contrast candidate’s responses to your organization’s views

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Steps to Creating a Candidate Questionnaire

*See [sample cover letter](#) and samples of questions that you can and cannot use

- 1**  **Assess if you will send the questionnaire with other organizations.**
While you cannot guarantee candidates will respond, you can work with other organizations to co-sponsor the questionnaire, which is likely to increase its level of “priority.”
- 2**  **Assess to level of elected office you will send the questionnaire to**
Before you begin composing a questionnaire, think about who you will be asking these questions to (governor, school board, state or federal legislature, mayor, e.g.). Do your research to make sure you include every candidate for a particular office. Collect the candidates’ contact information.
- 3**  **Create a timeline based on when you would like to post your responses**
Decide when you would like to publish the results to the questionnaire. Pick a date close to elections, but far enough so that the public can review responses and make their own assessments. Based off of this, work backwards to determine how much time you want to give candidates to respond to the questionnaire (eg: a couple of weeks at least). Make sure to give yourself enough time for follow-up and reminders.
- 4**  **Draft your questionnaire**
Remember to keep it short, clear, and unbiased. Avoid yes/no questions, always giving candidates the opportunity to explain themselves.
- 5**  **Review the questionnaire**
You should consider having someone with expertise in nonprofit electoral advocacy review the documents, such as the League of Women Voters in your locale.
- 6**  **Create a cover letter**
Compose a cover letter to attach to the questionnaire. The cover letter should:

 - Inform the candidate that a short questionnaire is being sent on behalf of your organization
 - Briefly explain what your organization does, including its 501(c)3 status
 - Clarify where the responses will be published and that if a candidate does not respond, the posting will include a Did Not Respond statement
 - Provide a deadline for responses
 - Give a word limit Make note of any word limit
 - Provide your contact information
- 7**  **Send your questionnaires and cover letters to all the candidates and a week before the deadline remind them that you have not received their response.**
Email each individual candidate with the questionnaire and cover letter. You may follow-up or send reminders if you do not hear back. You might receive phone calls from candidates’ offices inquiring about the questionnaire so be prepared to provide an explanation.
- 8**  **Thank the candidates and post the responses**
Make sure to thank candidates who fill out the questionnaire, and publish all responses after the deadline has passed.

How to Use the Candidate Questionnaire Responses

To use a candidate questionnaire effectively, it should be available for public viewing.

- You may publish the questions and responses onto your website but you may not make changes or paraphrase (except for minor editing).
- To ensure that you maintain neutrality, try to make the responses' appearance similar (use the same font style, font size, etc.) as to ensure that you are not indirectly endorsing one candidate over another.
- You may let others know that you have posted the responses.
- It is important to state if a candidate did not respond
- How do I make sure candidates respond to the questionnaire?

Below you will find a sample cover letter and questionnaire:

Sample Cover Letter

[Date]

Dear Candidate [X]:

On behalf of [organization's name], I write respectfully to request that you respond to questions submitted below regarding your agenda for the young children and their families living in [NAME of city or state]. Insert a brief description of your organization's goals and work.

The questions and answers, if received in time, will be published verbatim at the following website (s) [insert where they will be published] on [insert date]. We request that your full response not exceed XX number of words.

To meet our publication deadline, your responses must be received by no later than [date]. If you do not respond, the publication will state Did Not Respond.

No answer to any individual question may exceed [X words].

Please send your responses to me at [email address].

As a tax-exempt organization under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, we cannot support or oppose any candidate for public office.

We hope that you will take this opportunity to communicate your views on how you as [name of the position Governor, State Legislator, federal Senator, Mayor, e.g.] deal with policy and investments regarding young children and their families.

Sincerely,

[X]

Sample Questions— Questions cannot solely address early childhood/education

- 1 —————> What are your views on the needs of young children (birth to kindergarten) and what specific steps would you take to address these needs?
- 2 —————> What are your views on the ways in which we can close the education achievement gap with a particular focus on the early elementary grade years?
- 3 —————> What do you consider the appropriate federal/state/local investment in programs that support young children’s early care and education (such as child care and Head Start)? Please be as specific as possible.
- 4 —————> What steps would you take to make attracting and keeping quality educators in the early childhood education field?
- 5 —————> As [potential position in office], what would be your top 4 priorities in the first 100 days in this position?
- 6 —————> How would you improve the economy of [city/state/nation depending on the level of elected office]

More resources:

Alliance for Justice: Candidate Questionnaires and Voter Guides

http://bolderadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Candidate_Questionnaires_and_Voter_Guides.pdf

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