Candidate Questionnaires and Voter Guides

Nonpartisan guidelines for 501(c)(3) organizations

Candidate Questionnaires

Candidate questionnaires are a good way for your organization to help your clients and constituents become familiar with the candidates and their views. It's also an effective way to let candidates know what issues are of concern to you and your community.

Creating a questionnaire and getting candidates to respond takes time and persistence. Consider partnering with other organizations or forming a coalition to distribute the workload and increase the likelihood that your questionnaire will be taken seriously. Be prepared to do a lot of follow up with candidates and their campaigns. Keeping the questionnaire relatively short will increase the likelihood of getting responses.

501(c)(3) nonprofits must remain nonpartisan. A questionnaire or guide cannot be created and distributed with the intention of swaying voters for or against specific candidates. Your goal should be to provide nonpartisan education about the candidate's positions on issues important to you and the general public.

Content

- Include questions on a broad range of issues or a range of diverse topics within an area of focus like education or immigration reform.
- Keep your questions open-ended. Avoid yes/no, support/oppose or multiple choice formats. Candidates must be allowed to explain their answers within a reasonable word limit.
- Questions should be neutral and not hint at a "correct" answer

Distribution to Candidates

- Distribute the questionnaire to all candidates running for the same office.
- Allow sufficient time (three-four weeks) to follow up with the candidate's campaign. Do follow up by email and phone.
- Don't share one candidate's answers with another candidate before the final questionnaire or guide is published.
- You may answer questions about the questionnaire or clarify the meaning of a question, but don't coach the candidates on their answers. Nor should you ask or alter a question at a candidate' request.

Publishing the results

- Publish the responses of the candidates without editing/paraphrasing. As noted you can set a word limit for answers
- Make the responses publically available to your audience and the general public on your website.
- Do not rank or comment on candidates' responses

What if a candidate does not respond?
Assuming you've made repeated attempts to get answers, you can list "did not respond". You may also include the candidate's position based on neutral and unbiased information from their website and publicly available sources. If you do, be sure to footnote where you got the information when you publish the results.

Can we share results if only one candidate responds?
No. In the case only one candidate responds, sharing the results would appear to reflect partisan support for that candidate. **Only publish the results if at least two candidates respond.** While it's always good to have responses from the leading candidates, you can publish the results if most of those running have responded.

Voter Guides

The term "voter guide" is often used to refer to the published responses to a candidate questionnaire, but it can also refer to a guide to the candidates compiled using publicly available information from candidates' websites and other sources, and requiring no interaction with the candidates themselves. Such a guide may include any of the following:

- Candidate photos
- Candidates' party affiliation
- Candidates' experience and affiliations
- Major endorsements from organizations or individuals supplied by the candidates
- Voter Information on how to vote in the upcoming election
- Information on ballot measures, including your organization's position[1]

Lastly when sharing a questionnaire or voter guide, remind your audience that you are a nonpartisan organization and that you do not endorse or oppose any candidates.

[1] *Sharing your position on ballot measures is a lobbying activity. (See Nonprofits and Ballot Measures). Expenses must be tracked for reporting purposes.*