

Organizing and Producing Candidate Debates: An International Guide



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Foreward

This guide is intended to serve as a resource for organizers around the globe seeking to hold candidate debates for elected offices. It is based on the premise that there is no one best way to carry out these forums. Civic activists in each country should hold debates that reflect their culture and political system. As such, NDI has endeavored to present a menu of approaches in this guide from a range of countries. The contents reflect ideas and lessons that NDI has learned working in partnership with debate groups to organize more than 300 debates at all levels of government in more than 35 countries. This work is often carried out in close collaboration with the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD), the nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that has sponsored and produced all U.S. general election presidential and vice presidential debates since 1987. The CPD's 2012 debates were watched by an average of 64 million viewers in the U.S. and millions more abroad, generating interest in debates around the globe. NDI is grateful to the CPD for its long-standing partnership with the Institute and for generously sharing its expertise to develop this guide and provide ongoing long-distance and hands-on support to debate groups around the world.

In preparing this guide NDI has also benefited from the practical insights of members of Debates International, an 18-country association of new and seasoned debate groups with which NDI and the CPD have been privileged to collaborate. NDI has found that debate groups often face common challenges and can benefit from the experiences of their counterparts in other countries in overcoming obstacles. In addition to drawing on the expertise of Debates International members throughout this guide, the groups are listed in the final chapter as resources for fellow debate sponsoring organizations.

NDI also appreciates the advice and guidance from experienced debate practitioners who reviewed this guide as well as shared their expertise with debate organizers in many countries. This includes Janet Brown, Marty Slutsky, Rory Davies, Peter Eyre, Nancy Henrietta, and Moira Kelly of the CPD; and Trevor Fearon, Brian St. Juste, Eleanor Henry and Noel daCosta of the Jamaica Debates Commission. Of course, while the assistance of these individuals and organizations is sincerely appreciated, NDI is responsible for the final content of this guide. NDI appreciates the contributions of Institute staff members. This includes the primary author, Matt Dippell, who has assisted debate sponsors in more than 10 countries and taken leave from NDI to help the CPD organize a dozen U.S. debates for the 2004, 2008 and 2012 elections. Other NDI staff, including Angela Fifer, Kyle Fishman, Kathy Gest, Melanie Pitkin, Liz Renomeron, Francoise Stovall and Dean Valentine, assisted with the development of this guide and organized international debate activities that contributed to its contents. NDI would also like to recognize the support of the U.S. Agency for International Development and the National Endowment for Democracy, which have made this guide possible.

NDI hopes that this is a useful resource and welcomes feedback.

Kenneth Wollack

President

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1. The Global Debate Trend

Despite diverse politics and cultures, civic activists in countries in all parts of the world have begun to make debates among candidates for president, prime minister, legislatures and local government a centerpiece of their elections. (Box 1: What is a Candidate Debate?) To date more than 60 countries have developed a debate tradition. Behind this global trend is the conviction that debates benefit democracies in many ways, including helping voters make an informed choice at the ballot box; encouraging candidates to focus on public policy issues rather than personality, religion or ethnic loyalties; reducing the potential for violence by promoting civil discourse; and holding elected officials accountable to their campaign promises once in office. Debates can also help all candidates get their message out in places where one political force dominates the media environment. (Box 2: Goal of Debates)

2. Debates Strengthen Democracy

As noted above, debates can improve elections and democracies in a number of ways:

Focus Candidates on the Issues

The prospect of presenting and defending their views in a face-to-face forum with political opponents encourages candidates to develop and articulate their positions during a campaign. Political generalities, personal attacks or emotional appeals are insufficient to carry a candidate through in-depth, multi-hour discussions and the give-and-take that can occur during a debate. As a result, some candidates have found that debates have helped them to campaign and govern better once elected. (Box 3: Debates Help Candidates Prepare to Campaign and Govern if Elected)

As a Ghanaian debate sponsor¹ has noted, the forums have moved his country's elections "from the politics of insults to the politics of issues."²

¹ For the purposes of this guide, the term "sponsor" is used to refer to groups that organize debates.

² Remarks by Dr. Ransford Van Gyampo of the Institute of Economic Affairs at the NDI and CPD-sponsored International Debates Best Practices Symposium, Washington, D.C., June 2013.

Box 1: What is a Candidate Debate?

With roots in Latin, the term "debate" goes back centuries. Although exact meanings can vary across borders and languages, for the purposes of this guide a candidate debate is defined by several characteristics. It is a neutral, dignified forum where political party leaders or candidates competing for elected office respond to the same questions posed by voters, a moderator, panelist or rival debaters, thereby providing viewers and listeners the opportunity to compare directly the candidates' positions on issues. Debates are governed by rules mutually agreed upon by candidates -- most importantly limits on speaking time to ensure fairness. The forums normally include some interaction among candidates through rebuttals or follow-on questions. The events are also commonly broadcast on radio, television and the Internet to reach a wide audience.

Box 2: Goal of Debates

"The debate will address issues, not persons, not religion, not ethnicity, as we promote political tolerance, politics without bitterness, constructive dialogue and politics of service to the people."

— Aremo Taiwo Allimi, chairman of the Nigerian Elections Debate Group (NEDG), on the purpose of the group's 2012 governor debates in Ondo State, Nigeria

Source: "12 Parties Listed for Guber Election" <http://www.thisdaylive.com/articles/12-parties-listed-for-guber-election/124739>.

Box 3: Debates Help Candidates Prepare to Campaign and Govern if Elected

"I think they [debates] help us prepare...They force us to think about issues that maybe we hadn't focused on -- they force us to think ahead."

— Bob Dole, former U.S. senator and presidential candidate.

"...Having to do [debates] and knowing that if you blow it, they will change a lot of votes, forces people who wish to be president to do things that they should do. And I am convinced that the debates I went through...actually helped me to be a better president."

— Bill Clinton, former U.S. president

Source: *Tension City — Inside the Presidential Debates, from Kennedy-Nixon to Obama-McCain*, by Jim Lehrer, 2011, page 7.

Inform Voters

Debates are often the only time during a campaign when candidates are together at the same time in the same place. This provides voters with the rare opportunity to make side by side comparisons. The events also allow candidates to make the case for why they are best suited for the elected office at stake and present their positions on public policy issues. A moderator, panelists or opponent can also probe the candidate's statements and positions, highlight policy differences and hold debaters accountable for past actions. In addition, in the course of a debate candidates reveal the leadership style and personal qualities they would bring to the office. Public opinion surveys conducted after a series of debates held in 2011 by the Jamaica Debates Commission quantified the role that debates can play in informing voters: some 70 percent of the viewing and listening audience said the debates helped clarify candidates' positions.³

Help Reduce Political Tensions

In deeply divided election environments or countries emerging from conflict, debates provide an opportunity for political rivals to show that despite their differences they can treat each other with mutual respect even while they disagree on the issues. This role in lowering tensions begins even before the debate. The forums often require several months to organize and competing candidates or their representatives must sit down together and work with debate sponsors to find common ground on arrangements. This interaction can lessen tensions during a campaign and even build relationships that can contribute to post-election governance. Such dialogue would be unlikely to take place during a campaign period absent the holding of debates. (Box 4: Culture of Debate Prevents Violence) On debate day, in contrast to campaign rallies, candidates appear on stage together and discuss issues in a constructive and dignified manner as prescribed by debate rules. This joint appearance often includes a public handshake or embrace, acts that send a positive message to supporters in all political camps. As a debate participant stated, "The greatest thing about this debate is to see Liberian presidential candidates sitting here and talking to each other and trying to convince voters rather than being in the bush and shooting at each other."⁴ Debates can also provide a chance for candidates to commit publicly to peaceful elections, including agreeing to accept election results or using non-violent legal channels to resolve election disputes rather than calling supporters to the streets. (Box 5: Debate Fosters Pledge of Non-Violence) The positive environment created by a debate stands in sharp contrast to campaign rallies where candidates are prone to use more aggressive and less substantive rhetoric to please diehard

Box 4: Culture of Debate Prevents Violence

"We fought a senseless war for 11 years...we destroyed every piece of our society. If we had the culture of debate we would not have to war; people would not have lost their lives..."

— James Williams, secretary general of the Sierra Leone Guild of Newspaper Editors

Source: Remarks at the NDI and CPD-sponsored International Debates Best Practices Symposium, Washington, D.C., June 2013.

Box 5: Debate Fosters Pledge of Non-Violence

"We are all saying that we don't want a repeat of 2008 [violence] in this country. We have said as CORD that we will accept the results of the elections...If we are defeated we will accept defeat. If there are any complaints we will go to court."

— Raila Odinga, presidential candidate, Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD), 2012 Kenyan elections

Source: "Kenya: Contenders Vow to Accept March Outcome" <http://allafrica.com/stories/201302120069.html>.

³ Jamaica Debates Commission Post-Debate Poll Report: To assess the impact of the three National Debates, December 2011; Boxill Survey Team, January 2012.

⁴ Joseph Korto of the Liberia Equal Right Party. allAfrica.com. September 19, 2005.

party supporters. In Indonesia, election authorities put forward proposals to ban political rallies and replace them with more structured debates among competing parties and their candidates.⁵ The election authorities argued that the campaign rallies often stoked conflict while debates offered voters a means of learning about the candidates' positions.

Promote Accountability by Elected Officials

During a debate, a candidate's statements, policy positions and campaign promises become part of the public record. Once a winning candidate takes office, citizens, the media and civic organizations can hold them to account by citing transcripts, videos or press coverage of debates. In addition, debate sponsors in some countries have begun to hold post-election debates as a means for citizens and political opponents to ask elected officials what they have achieved in office – contrasting campaign promises and actions. (page 51)

Level the Political Playing Field

In countries where one political party holds sway over the political scene, candidates often face incumbents who dominate media coverage or use public resources to support their campaigns. As a result, opposing candidates find it difficult to compete and communicate their policy platforms to voters. In uneven political environments, debates provide an opportunity to reach voters directly on radio and television, providing an effective, nonpartisan way to help “level the playing field” among candidates.

Highlight the Health of a Democracy

Debates are increasingly seen both domestically and internationally as benchmarks of a healthy, maturing democracy. Citizens often view debates as an indication of an open, transparent election process where all candidates can compete equally, particularly in countries emerging from a period of nondemocratic rule. Voters are also able to see issues they are concerned about addressed by candidates during debates and hold them accountable for past actions. All these factors can contribute to the overall legitimacy of an election process. Similarly, since debates are often landmark events watched by neighboring nations and audiences overseas, the forums can highlight progress in consolidating democracy. For some countries, this positive international profile can, in turn, help encourage economic investment, trade and tourism. In addition, debates can have a spillover effect, often spurring calls for debates in nearby countries. After watching a neighbor's debate, commentators and civic activists often publicly ask why they are not afforded similar opportunities to inform voters and hold leaders accountable as noted in the following editorial:

“In Africa, presidential debates are also gaining huge popularity...In Ghana, the presidential debate has now become a culture, refusing to participate is not even an option...In Kenya, the first ever presidential debate was held in February 2013. There were eight candidates and they all battled it out in front of a huge audience...In Zimbabwe it is high time we embrace the democratic path that has been followed by our sister nations that have walked the same road that we do now.”⁶

Despite the many benefits noted above, debate initiatives in some countries have failed when sponsors could not overcome various challenges, including allaying fears that organizers may have a political bias; convincing reluctant candidates to participate; negotiating with competing media outlets to broadcast debates; identifying skilled, impartial moderators and panelists; raising necessary funds; and producing live national television and radio broadcasts. The following chapters outline approaches from around the world to overcome these challenges.

⁵ “Presidential poll rallies may be banned in Indonesia,” *Intellasia/ The Straits Times*, March 27, 2009.

⁶ <http://allafrica.com/stories/201307240358.html?viewall=1>

3. Debate Organizing Principles

Given the unpredictable nature of election campaigns and the inherent logistical challenges, organizing a debate can be a demanding task whether for the first or 20th time. Debate groups may wish to keep several principles in mind to help guide decision-making as inevitable issues arise.

Be Impartial and Organized Above All

The success of a debate sponsoring group rides on its ability to establish and maintain a reputation as a fair, neutral and transparent organization. In addition, the sponsor must be capable of staging well organized, professional and dignified forums. Perceptions of partisanship or a track record of poorly run debates can undermine an organization's ability to convince candidates to take part in the short- and long-term.

Focus on the Ultimate Goal

The purpose of a debate is straightforward — to help voters make a more informed choice among candidates for elected office. In the crush of organizing a debate, sponsors should seek to keep this goal as a guiding principle and avoid going down paths that may be perceived, fairly or unfairly, as promoting particular media or commercial interests.

Keep it Simple

A debate requires managing myriad organizational, production, media and political issues simultaneously. Keeping plans basic — especially for a first time debate — means there is less that can go awry. A simplified approach can help minimize last minute complications that take time and energy away from achieving the core mission of informing voters. More sophisticated production and organizational elements can be added over time to subsequent debates once a sponsor is more experienced and established.

No Such Thing as a Bad Debate

Although debate sponsors should stand steadfast on some key issues, a less than perfect debate is better than no debate at all. Even a flawed debate informs voters to some degree. Moreover, just having a debate is a first step toward the forums becoming an expected and integral part of elections. Sponsors can make adjustments and improve future debates with each election cycle. (Box 6: Is a Debate a “Success” Without *All* the Candidates?)

No Candidates, No Debates

A corollary to the point above, sponsors may wish to be flexible when faced with sticky negotiation issues that could make the difference between candidates agreeing to debate or walking away. Few countries have laws requiring candidates to debate, which means that sponsors may have to go to what

Box 6: Is a Debate a “Success” Without *All* the Candidates?

Debate organizers commonly face a scenario where all the invited candidates do not participate, including leading incumbent or opposition contenders. Despite these absences, going forward with debates can play a key role in focusing campaigns on public policy issues and reducing political tensions, among other benefits. These contributions can help build public support and momentum for institutionalizing the forums as an expected part of the election process. As public expectations grow over time, candidates will feel increasingly compelled to take part in debates to avoid the political costs of bowing out. In Ghana, for example, organizers held historic, widely watched debates for two elections without the participation of incumbent candidates before seeing all the main presidential aspirants take the stage in 2008. In short, even if all candidates do not opt to take part, debates can still be a success.

seem like extraordinary lengths to secure their participation. While core principles such as political neutrality and fairness must not be sacrificed under any circumstances, in the long-run it is generally worth making concessions to candidates that prevent negotiations and the debate itself from collapsing. As public expectations and media support for debates grow over time, the inevitability that debates will take place increases and the ability of candidates to evade debates or impose conditions diminishes.

4. Organizing a Debate

GETTING STARTED: AN ORGANIZATIONAL TO-DO LIST

- Select the appropriate debate organization model;
- Develop a debate plan — timeline, budget, staffing, format;
- Select a production approach and partner;
- Develop a media strategy to promote the debate;
- Present debate plan to parties and candidates and inform other key players;
- Negotiate with candidates and the media; and
- Hold and broadcast the debate;
- Evaluate the debate to improve for the future.

Establishing a Debate Sponsoring Organization

Candidate debates around the world have been successfully organized by a range of entities, including nongovernmental organizations, election authorities, broadcast regulatory bodies, media associations and individual TV and radio stations. Each approach brings different benefits and tradeoffs according to the dynamics of a particular country. In this respect, there is no single best method for organizing debates. This principle is exemplified by the variety of organizational models that debate groups around the world have developed. At the same time, the approaches generally share fundamental characteristics that help to:

- Ensure impartiality and independence;
- Provide the organizational capacity to hold a well-structured debate;
- Have credibility that helps generate support for debates with political parties, media and the general public;
- Meet legal regulations affecting debates in a particular country; and
- Help institutionalize the practice of debates over the long-term.

Organizational Options for Debate Sponsors

In organizing debates, sponsors around the world have adopted a range of approaches tailored to their culture and politics. Options range from starting a new debate group from scratch to building on the credibility and capacity of an existing organization.

Debates-Only Organization

In this model, sponsors can charter an independent civic organization with the sole long-term mission of organizing debates. The group can focus staff and resources just on debates and avoid juggling a broader agenda. Zeroing in on candidate debates can also make it easier for the group to establish its debate “brand” with the public, media and candidates. The group may have a board and staff to carry out activities. An example of this approach is the U.S.-based Commission on Presidential Debates.⁷

⁷ For more information on the Commission on Presidential Debates, see www.debates.org

Permanent or Ad Hoc Coalition

This approach includes bringing different groups together in an alliance for the purpose of organizing debates. In practice, such coalitions have ranged in size from two to more than a dozen organizations. One advantage of a coalition approach is that the assembled groups collectively have greater respect from candidates, organizational capacity and potential resources, which can encourage candidates to take part. The coalition may be launched with a separate name distinct from its member organizations to highlight the effort. Examples of this model include the Jamaica Debates Commission, a partnership between the Chamber of Commerce and the Media Association of Jamaica, and the Nigeria Elections Debate Group, a coalition of some 18 media, labor and women's groups, among others.⁸ Some groups have come together on an ad hoc basis for a specific debate, retaining their individual organizational identities rather than adopting a separate brand as a coalition. In addition, if a single sponsoring organization is seen, fairly or unfairly, by some as politically biased, forming a coalition with other organizations that provide perceived balance can help reinforce an image of impartiality. Potentially competing debate sponsors may also seek to join forces. (Box 7: Compete or Collaborate?)

Box 7: Compete or Collaborate?

Because of the high profile and importance of debates, many potential sponsoring groups may emerge as elections approach. This can present a not uncommon scenario where groups are competing to stage debates. In some instances, reluctant candidates may seek to play rival debate groups against each other by agreeing to some debates and avoiding others. As a result, leading candidates may not end up appearing at the same event, thereby depriving the voters of the chance to contrast the top aspirants for office. To avoid this situation, the respective groups may wish to explore some degree of collaboration, which can range from uniting forces, to coordinating separate activities or agreeing to organize distinct types of events that do not “step” on one another-- such as one debate with all candidates and another forum with just the leading contenders. A coalition approach can also give the groups' efforts greater collective clout and increase the chance the candidates will debate.

Debate Leadership or Advisory Board

In some countries, sponsors opt to build on the organizational strengths and reputation for impartiality of an existing organization. This can include bolstering a well-established group by adding a board of respected figures to help advise or lead the debate effort. By lending their experience, personal credibility, and public stature, board members can help increase the confidence of candidates and citizens in the debates initiative. Potential board members can include statesmen, religious and civic leaders or other notables. Inviting board members to join who are respected by specific segments of society can also reinforce the impartial image of the sponsoring group. The Institute of Economic Affairs of Ghana is an example of this model.⁹

Established Organization

Sponsors can make debates one element of their good government advocacy or election activities. In this approach, the debate is organized under the auspices and name of an existing group. This enables the group to take advantage of its organizational capacity and reputation for neutrality and professionalism. The Peruvian election monitoring organization, Transparencia, is an example of this approach.¹⁰ A variation is to establish a debate effort as a long-term initiative of a respected organization such as the Trinidad and Tobago Debates Commission, which is a project of the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Commerce and Industry.¹¹

⁸ For more information on the Jamaica Debates Commission and Nigeria Elections Debate Group respectively see www.jamaicadebatescommission.org and www.nedgonline.org

⁹ For more information on the Institute of Economic Affairs, see www.ieagh.org

¹⁰ For more information on Transparencia, see www.transparencia.org.pe

¹¹ For more information on the Trinidad and Tobago Debate Commission, see www.ttdc.org.tt

Whatever organizational option a debate sponsor chooses, the group must be governed and perceived to be founded on the principles of impartiality and transparency. Are the group's decision-makers seen as evenhanded and neutral? Have they agreed to maintain certain ethical standards in their organization of debates? Adherence to these principles is essential to maintain the trust and support of candidates and the electorate. Organizers may wish to establish a public ethics pledge for members of the debate group. (Box 8: Mission Statement and Ethics Code – Jamaica Debates Commission)

How Much Time is Needed to Organize a Debate?

There are a number organizational and production tasks to undertake for a successful debate. Sponsors around the world have shown that there is no universal timeframe to complete these steps. Debates can be organized over the course of weeks, months or even years, depending on such variables as the elective office at stake, the election date, legal requirements, funding, staff and volunteer support, the debate venue, and the degree of support of candidates and the media.

Debate tasks can be divided into the rough categories of organization, negotiations with candidates and the media, production and public relations. Sponsors can estimate a working timeline based on their assessment of how long each task would require in their particular country.

Box 8: Mission Statement and Ethics Code — Jamaica Debates Commission

The Jamaica Debates Commission's mission is to assist in the strengthening and growth of the democratic process by encouraging and supporting the dissemination and discussion of political views in an open and unbiased manner so as to enable the Jamaican electorate to make informed decisions for voting. The Commission is of the view that by staging and widely distributing national political debates it will encourage political parties and the public to identify and focus on the issues of national importance.

THE COMMISSION'S OBJECTIVE — The staging of debates between Jamaican political parties is the Commission's primary reason for being.

SINE QUA NON OF SUCCESS — Without the unreserved confidence of the contesting political parties in the Commission's constant impartiality, the Commission would fail in the pursuit of its objective. In order to preserve this confidence, it is imperative that at all times appearances should project and reflect the reality of non-partisanship.

RULES — Accordingly each of the Commissioners and their spouses will from the date of their appointment fully observe all of the following Rules of Conduct in letter and spirit. Commissioners will, in relation to any Jamaican political party, refrain from:

1. Being a member.
2. Providing support (in any capacity) on a public platform for any party or candidate.
3. Making, facilitating, or allowing to be made, any public statement for or against any party or candidate.
4. Making personal contributions to the funding of any party or candidate.
5. Attending any of its fundraising events or that of any of its candidates.
6. Participating in the design of any party's or candidate's campaign.
7. Authoring, editing, contributing to scripts of announcements, pronouncements, manifestos or policies.
8. Offering, extending, promising or arranging for any preference or advantage over any other party or candidate.
9. Discriminating in favour of or against any party or candidate.
10. Being a candidate for election.
11. Disclosing their own voting intentions or on how they voted in the past.
12. Making public comment on (a) any matter likely to affect voting outcome and (b) the likely outcome of voting, after the election date has been announced.

Courtesy of the Jamaica Debates Commission

Organizational Tasks¹²

Establish a Debate Group that Fits Best

As noted on page 14, a first step for sponsors is to determine the best type of organization to hold a debate based on the available time, the political environment and legal regulations in each country.

Identify and Assign Staffing Responsibilities

There are many tasks large and small that contribute collectively to a successful debate. Depending on the scope and scale of the debate, an individual or teams may play several roles. The general areas of responsibility and specific tasks can include:

- Overall debate coordination
- Budgeting and financial management
- Debate format
- Debate venue
- Fundraising
- Negotiations with media
- Negotiations with candidates
- Public relations
- Production
- Security
- Volunteers

Choose a Debate Venue

One of the most important decisions for a sponsor is selecting a venue for the debate from a variety of options, including school auditoriums, civic centers, theaters, hotels, television studios or outdoor spaces. The venue that is best suited may be determined by the scale and format of the debate. Above all, the location should be seen as politically neutral by the candidates and public. Any perceptions of bias can be used by candidates as a reason to bow out. (Box 9: Selecting A Debate Venue)

Decide on a Debate Format

Choose an appropriate format for the debate that will be incorporated into the debate plan presented to candidates and coordinated with the sponsor's production team. Sponsors

Box 9: Selecting a Debate Venue

When picking a location for a debate, it may be helpful to keep the following questions in mind:

- **Broadcast** — Will the debate be broadcast on television or radio? Can the space provide room for the necessary production equipment? It may be useful to get the advice of a production specialist to be certain the space can accommodate the broadcast set-up to prevent problems and costs later on.
- **Audience** — Will there be an audience? Does the venue match the size of the expected audience or can a television studio with limited audience seating be used? Remember that debate production elements, such as the stage, cameras and lighting, among others, can consume significant amounts of space at the venue and reduce available seating.
- **Acoustics** — Does the venue have features, such as carpeting, drapes or sound deadening panels that prevent undesirable echoes or other noises?
- **Staging** — Will a stage, podium, table or other furniture for the candidates and moderator be required? Will chairs be needed for an audience?
- **Safety and Security** — Can adequate security be provided for the candidates and audience? Does the space meet fire and building safety codes? Will public law enforcement provide security or will a private vendor need to be contracted?
- **Fees** — What will it cost to use the venue? Can a free space be obtained?
- **Candidate Holding Areas** — Does the venue include spaces for each of the candidates to prepare (with staff) or have make-up applied before the debate?
- **Media Area** — Will there be a special area for the media to watch and report on the debate itself as well as conduct interviews and provide commentary afterwards. (See page 21 for more information on a media center.)
- **Accessibility** — Is a prospective space easily accessible to candidates and media? Does it offer adequate parking for staff and the audience? Is it accessible to persons with disabilities?
- **Community Participation Opportunities** — Are there added benefits of a particular location such as a university campus — which helps to engage students and other members of the community?
- **Outdoor Spaces** — If using an exterior location, is a reliable power supply available? Can the area be secured? Could noise or inclement weather disrupt the event?

¹² With permission from the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD), some concepts and text in sections (A) Organizational Tasks, (B) Negotiations with Candidates, (D) Production and (E) Public Relations in Chapter 5, "Organizing A Debate" are drawn directly from the CPD's *Guide to Hosting Your Own Debate*, (CPD ©2012) and adapted for an international context.

should bear in mind that format options have different technical requirements that can add to organizational tasks and costs. (See page 25 for format options.)

Develop a Budget

How much does a debate cost? Amounts vary widely and depend on the local economy, the ability to secure in-kind contributions and the level of office for which the debate is held. For example, a 2005 presidential debate in East Timor cost \$360 USD and a 2011 parliamentary leader debate in Jamaica ran to approximately \$40,000 USD.¹³ Purchasing television and radio airtime can often represent a substantial outlay if media outlets do not provide it at reduced rates or as an in-kind public service contribution. To develop a preliminary idea of the resources needed for a debate, it may be helpful to pencil out costs for some of the general line items commonly found in a debate budget including:

- Staff salary and benefits
- Consultants
- Venue rental (e.g. theater, hotel)
- Television and radio airtime
- Security (e.g. private security services for the debate venue)
- Food and catering (e.g. for the day of debate)
- Transportation (e.g. national air travel, vehicle rental, taxis)
- Television production (e.g. labor, equipment, set, make-up artists)
- Printing and graphics (e.g. tickets, programs, credentials, posters)
- Publicity (e.g. website, streaming video, TV and radio spots, newspaper ads)
- Organizational overhead (e.g. rent, telephone, utilities)

Put a Financial Management and Reporting System in Place

The capacity to accurately track and report on debate related expenditures will be important to staying on budget and for the long-term credibility of the debate group. This includes being able to report back to contributors on how funds were spent. Some debate groups publicly post information on their donors, budgets and expenditures to demonstrate their commitment to transparency and further build public confidence in their activities.

Secure Funding

Once a budget has been developed for the debate, fundraising efforts may be needed to cover costs. Many debate groups seek member contributions or support from foundations, the private sector or other national and international donors to help underwrite the costs. Debate organizers can appeal to sponsors on the benefits of debates for the country as well as offer public acknowledgement for their contributions. In addition to determining what types of donor recognition to offer, it is important to set limits where donor involvement is not appropriate, such as providing input on questions, placing commercial logos behind candidates on stage or influencing the organization of debates in areas that would affect the perceived impartiality, quality or independence of a debate sponsoring group.

Present Plan to Candidates, Parties, Media and other Central Players

To begin to engage the key actors in the debate plans, sponsors may wish to start by consulting with political parties and candidates to introduce the general idea of debates and hopefully receive their input and support. Sponsors may also want to get in touch with others who may have a role in the debates, including election authorities and the media, to make sure they are aware of the effort and to gain their support. Consulting with the key players can help flag any potential obstacles that can make or break a debate. As debate dates approach, regular meetings with candidates will be needed to finalize key details.

¹³ The 2005 East Timor presidential debate received extensive in-kind support, including UN-sponsored radio and television broadcasts and a free university venue and other assistance. For more details on the Jamaican debate budget see the Jamaica Debates Commission publication, *Facing the Electorate, A Manual for the Staging of General Election Debates* at www.jamaicadebatescommission.org.

Ensure Public Safety

A debate is often the only time when candidates are together at the same time in the same place, making public safety arrangements essential. Close coordination with police and other security officials will be important at all stages of the debate planning process. This includes debate day security for candidates, the facility and debate production equipment, and even road closures and traffic control. Audience ticketing and media credentialing procedures can help provide the sponsor with additional control over access to the debate venue.

Set Guidelines for Tickets and the Debate Audience

If a debate has a live audience, the sponsor will need to decide who will be invited and how many people can be accommodated at the debate venue once production needs are taken into consideration. Developing a clear ticketing policy early on can help address anticipated requests from the public and VIPs as the debate approaches. It will also be important to establish rules for audience behavior during the debate, such as remaining silent or not using flash cameras, which can be distracting to candidates and affect the quality of the TV or radio broadcast. It is important to remember that the larger the audience, the greater the logistical challenges and possibility of noise. Make plans for handling audience security contingencies such as cheering, heckling or other disruptive behavior.

Recruit Debate Volunteers

In addition to having regular staff assisting with the debate, sponsors may wish to recruit volunteers to help on the day of the debate, which also provides an opportunity to involve local community groups or students. Having a coordinator to recruit and manage volunteers can help ensure this support is used effectively and the debate experience is positive for the volunteers.

Have a Legal Advisor Available

Having quick access to legal advice can be useful on several fronts. This can include complying with electoral regulations or requirements for forming a debate sponsoring organization. An advisor can also assist in the event of legal issues, such as lawsuits or injunctions, from candidates who may not be invited to take part in a debate because they do not meet pre-established participation criteria, or incidents that occur at the debates themselves.

Begin Negotiations with Candidates

After presenting a plan, the debate sponsor generally takes part in a series of discussions with the candidates' representatives to finalize the logistical arrangements and format for the debate. (See page 46 for approaches to negotiations with candidates.)

Partnering with the Media

As noted, developing an effective partnership with the print and electronic media is essential to ensuring that a debate reaches the widest possible audience. The specific role of the media in organizing debates can vary according to the production arrangements (see page 30) and the composition of the debates sponsoring organization (see page 14).

Some debate groups have found it helpful to negotiate a cooperation agreement with media partners to ensure there is clarity on key aspects of the broadcast and what each will contribute to the debate effort. (Box 10: Debate Sponsor–Media Agreements)

Forming a partnership with the media can be affected by a range of issues that sponsors may want to anticipate and factor into their discussions. In some countries, as noted below, negotiations with the

media have proved as challenging as the talks with the candidates:

Media Rivalry

Competition among media outlets may reduce their willingness to collaborate in a debate effort. This can include refusing to broadcast or cover a debate sponsored by a rival station. Sponsors may find it helpful to avoid this competition by working through media associations where all stations are represented or the state media outlet, which in some countries is not be viewed as a rival to commercial broadcasters.

Candidate–Media Tensions

Strained relations between candidates and the media over the tone of campaign coverage can lead candidates to “blackball” media outlets as debate carriers or specific journalists as debate moderators, running counter to station efforts to showcase their top on-air journalists. In some instances, this friction has led media outlets to threaten to boycott covering debates entirely. To help preempt such a situation, sponsors may wish to highlight publicly the criteria used to select moderators and panelists, and explain how the selection process is designed to respect both journalists and the debate.

Scheduling Conflicts

The media may also balk if the possible dates for the debates conflict with broadcasts that draw large audiences and generate significant advertising revenue. Consult with the media in advance to avoid this scenario. Sponsors of a 2014 provincial debate in Ontario, Canada, for example, had to work around a national hockey play-off game.¹⁴

Airtime Costs

The media may also request that sponsors pay for airtime for the debates, which significantly increases the fundraising burden on a debate group. Sponsors can make the case that free or discounted airtime is an important contribution to the public good and a civic responsibility.

Box 10: Debate Sponsor–Media Agreements

Some debate groups have found it helpful to prepare cooperation agreements with media partners to ensure a common understanding of key aspects of the broadcast and what each party will contribute to the debate. Sample agreement provisions from a range of countries include:

- **Shared Objectives** — Affirm a mutual commitment to holding dignified, impartial forums that treat candidates equally in terms of lighting, audio, holding rooms, make-up and camera shots, among other production areas.
- **Debate Arrangements** — State the dates, location and format of the debates.
- **Sponsor and Media Commitments** — Delineate what the debate sponsor and the media are contributing respectively to the forums.
- **Television and Radio Feed** — Confirm arrangements on the distribution of the debate broadcast both for national and international networks.
- **Campaign Ads** — Prohibit the airing of paid political ads during the debate broadcasts if sponsors envision commercial breaks.
- **Ownership of Broadcast Rights** — Establish who owns the rights to the debate broadcast, including whether it will be made available to other stations. This can include post-debate provisions on using footage for campaign ads as well as longer term access by civic watchdog groups seeking to promote accountability of elected officials as well as academic researchers, educators and students.
- **“Clean” Broadcast** — Consider limiting the number of visible on-screen graphics that may be added by a media outlet to the debate broadcast feed. These images can be distracting to the audience or perceived as biased, such as news crawls, SMS text voting on candidate performances and real-time audience reactions to candidate statements (e.g. focus group dial testing), among others.
- **Live Broadcast** — Establish guidelines on whether debates must be shown live and in their entirety, in part to prevent selective editing of the broadcast that may be perceived as biased against a particular candidate.
- **Production Costs** — Confirm who will be covering the cost of producing the debate broadcast, including building the set, hiring the technical crew, etc.
- **Debate Promotions** — Enlist the media to run regular announcements promoting upcoming debates.

¹⁴ <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/ontario-leaders-debate-tentatively-set-for-tuesday-june-3/article18707127/>

Production

Top quality production arrangements are central to ensuring that debates sound good on radio and appear professional and impartial to a live audience or people watching on TV. At a minimum, once a venue has been selected, a debate requires microphones and furniture for the candidates, panelists and moderator. If broadcast on TV, other elements will be required, including lighting, cameras and a set, among other items. If held outside a studio, a mobile production van may be needed to broadcast the event. Sponsors will also need production staff, which can be provided by a media partner or contracted. (See page 30 for a discussion of production considerations.)

Public Relations

Create a Public Relations Strategy

A key aspect of organizing a debate is facilitating media coverage of the preparations to build interest and support for the debate itself. This strategy can include such tasks as:

- Building a database of media contacts to be kept informed of the debate initiative;
- Developing press releases and fact sheets for regular media inquiries and interviews;
- Holding media conferences;
- Using social media to provide debate updates – homepage, Facebook, Twitter, etc.;
- Placing promotional spots on radio and television or ads in print media; and
- Drafting and encouraging allies to place pro-debate editorials.

Consider Special Arrangements for Working Media

Since candidate debates can clearly be historic news events, it can be beneficial to facilitate media coverage and avoid negative experiences that may color reporting of the debate itself. In some countries, debate sponsors elect to set up a work and hospitality area for print and electronic journalists at the debate site. Although the size and services provided in this area can vary widely, the media should be able to watch the debate and file news stories. This area can be inside or close to the debate venue and can include seating and tables, TV sets, Internet and phone connections, electrical outlets as well as food and beverages. This space can also be used by the media to conduct interviews with candidates or their representatives after the debates. Some sponsors have opted to erect additional “stand-up” positions outside the debate venue. These exterior positions can provide locations for reporting before, during and after debates, including offering a telegenic backdrop of the debate hall and debate sponsor logos. (Box 11: Facilitate Media Coverage)

Box 11: Facilitate Media Coverage

Exterior media “stand up” positions for the 2011 Peruvian presidential debate



Establish a Web Presence

Sponsors may wish to set up a website and social media presence to serve as an information platform for the public and the media to promote the debates. In this respect, the site can include such information as:

- Debate organization mission statement;
- Leadership of the debate group;
- Date, location and time of the debates;
- Contact information;
- Press releases;
- Ongoing updates on topics, candidates, moderator or panelists;
- Information on debate tickets;
- News articles and pro-debate editorials;
- Ability to receive donations for the debates;
- Recognition of donors; and
- Web platform for live streaming the debate.

Create Printed Materials

As appropriate, sponsors may want to print tickets and programs to describe the debate and recognize donors. Posters may also be helpful to promote the event. (See Box 12: Malawi Presidential Debate Invitation and Box 13: Promotional Poster for 2010 Haitian Presidential Debates.)

Post the Video and Create Transcripts

To facilitate the work of journalists covering the debates, allow later viewing and help hold candidates accountable to their promises going forward, sponsors can post video of debates as well as transcripts as soon as feasible after the event.

Organize Voter Education Activities

Debate groups have developed many ways to multiply the impact of debates from debate viewing parties to online discussions, among others. (See page 48 for more information on debate-related voter education activities.)

Recognize Participating Candidates

To make debating a positive experience for candidates, some sponsors make it a practice to publicly present a certificate of participation at the conclusion of the forum. This recognition is designed to highlight the positive contribution that participating candidates have made by focusing the election campaign on issues, promoting civility and thereby strengthening democratic practices in the country.



How Many Candidates Should be Invited to Debate?

In organizing debates, sponsors often face the dilemma of how many candidates should be invited. The issue often centers on whether sponsors should be inclusive of all candidates who are running for a particular office, which in some cases could number into the dozens, or focus primarily on aspirants who have a reasonable chance of winning. The decision is often particularly relevant in charged political environments in countries that are emerging from conflict, navigating a democratic transition or confronting regional, ethnic or religious divisions. There are tradeoffs with either of these alternatives that sponsors can weigh.

With an inclusive debate, the sponsor sends the message that all candidates have a right to be heard. At the same time, inviting candidates from minor parties to a debate can, in some instances, cause the leading contenders to drop out. From an organizational perspective, involving all candidates makes staging more cumbersome and reduces the time each candidate has to speak.

Limiting the number of candidates allows voters to hear in more depth about the policies of the front runners, who are more likely to actually gain office and govern. However, excluding a number of candidates can open up sponsors to public accusations of discrimination and political bias against the aspirants (or even legal action) from smaller parties that do not receive an invitation.

When contemplating these tradeoffs, some sponsors opt for a middle ground that incorporates elements of both positions by holding multiple debates or adding complementary activities to help all candidates get their message to the public. These approaches can include:

Hold Multiple Debate Sessions

To accommodate a large number of candidates, sponsors can divide the participants into more manageable groups (such as eight or fewer candidates) with the candidate groupings decided by drawing lots or applying clear criteria. The multiple debates can be staged back-to-back or over several days; the Nigeria Election Debate Group (NEDG), for example, organized 12 presidential debates in 2007 so all 24 candidates could take part in pairs over the course of a day. For a 2013 governor debate in Anambra state, the NEDG invited some 23 candidates to take part. Although not all candidates ultimately participated, the NEDG held two debates per day for the candidates in groups of seven and nine respectively. A final debate was held with the top four contenders who were selected based on criteria, including a debate audience survey, the number of campaign rallies held and party structures. In Haiti, the Public Policy Intervention Group (*Groupe d'Intervention en Affaires Publiques*, GIAP) hosted 19 presidential candidates for the 2010 and 2011 elections. GIAP organized a series of five televised

Box 13: Promotional Poster for 2010 Haitian Presidential Debates



Courtesy of Public Policy Intervention Group
(Groupe d'Intervention en Affaires Publiques, GIAP)

debates with groups of three to four debaters each over a five week period.

Organize Tiered Debates

Sponsors may wish to hold two debates, the first of which can include all candidates. The second would include just the front runners as determined by pre-established criteria.

Host Candidate Forums

Sponsors can offer all candidates the chance to take part in a public forum where each can briefly present his or her respective qualifications and platform in turn and potentially answer a few questions as time permits; such a forum could be held before the main debates involving a more limited number of candidates.

Provide Television, Radio or Print Media Spots

Each candidate can be invited to record an introductory media spot that can be broadcast to help gain public exposure; in Peru in 2006, for example, the debate sponsoring group *Transparencia* invited each of 20 candidates to record a 30-minute interview that was broadcast on state television in blocks.

Organize Both First Round and Run-Off Debates

In countries with a two-round election system, a debate sponsor can hold debates in a first round election with a large number of candidates and then stage a smaller event with the more limited number

Box 14: Comparative Candidate Participation Criteria

The following are examples of criteria used by debate sponsors from a range of countries to determine which candidates are invited to debate:

Evidence of Public Support

- The candidate meets a pre-established level of popular support in an impartial, credible public opinion survey (or average of a number of surveys) a pre-determined number of days before the debate; the level of support candidates must attain to be invited to debate typically varies by country: e.g. Jamaica 10%; South Korea 5%; U.S. 15%.
- The candidate's party has a mathematical chance of forming a government if it were to win the election; (e.g. the party is running candidates for a sufficient number of seats to obtain a majority in a parliamentary system).
- The candidate has met requirements to be registered and is on the ballot in the required number of provinces or states necessary to win the election (e.g. some presidential systems).
- The candidate has achieved national newsworthiness and competitiveness as determined by a council of experts weighing such factors as: column inches on newspaper front pages, coverage on news programs, public attendance at political rallies, recognition by leading political analysts and editorial boards.
- The candidate's party received a threshold percentage of support in the most recent election that allows it to maintain legal status. (e.g. South Korea, 3% for presidential, national legislature, and mayoral races).
- The candidate represents a party that is historically relevant in the political life of the country.

Organized and Active Political Force

- The candidate's party has conducted democratic internal elections.
- The candidate's party has an established national organizational structure.
- The candidate is actively campaigning for office.
- The candidate has organized a threshold number of campaign rallies.
- The candidate and party have developed and publicly presented a policy platform or manifesto.
- The candidate's party has seats in the national legislature.
- The candidate's party fields a pre-established minimum of candidates for other posts at stake in the same election; (e.g. national legislature, governor, municipalities).
- A candidate has raised and spent a threshold amount of campaign funds.

Legal Eligibility to Run for Office

- The candidate meets constitutional requirements to assume office if elected (e.g. minimum age, natural born citizen, residency, no criminal record).
- The candidate has been officially registered by electoral authorities.
- The candidate legally qualifies to receive public funding for campaigning.

Non-Violence or Governance Pledge

- The candidate has agreed to abide by an election or post-election governance agreement such as a commitment to non-violence or an anti-corruption effort.

of candidates going to a run-off round; there is always the risk, however, that a candidate can win the election in the first round, making a second debate moot.

As noted, if a sponsor decides to limit the number of candidates in a debate, criteria can be set to determine who will be invited to take part. It may be useful to keep several principles in mind when establishing criteria:

Be Transparent

Global experience indicates that the most effective criteria are objective, impartial and easily understood by the general public. Announcing the criteria early in the election cycle — before candidates have been nominated — can help prevent later accusations of bias in deciding who will take part in debates.

Develop a Multi-faceted Set of Criteria

As noted, participation criteria can include a combination of factors, including constitutional and legal eligibility, an active party organization (including fielding candidates and presenting a platform, among others) and reaching a certain threshold in public support as measured by opinion polling. (See Box 14: Comparative Candidate Participation Criteria for examples of criteria used by debate groups around the world.)

Be Ready for Public Criticism

If some candidates are excluded because they or their parties do not meet pre-established criteria, debate sponsors can anticipate public complaints and even legal action from the affected candidates. Sponsors may wish to prepare for this scenario by proactively explaining the criteria publicly in advance and preparing fact sheets for possible questions from the media and candidates. (Box 15: Be Ready for Reactions to Criteria)

Debate Staging Format Options

A range of formats can be used to help ensure debates are interesting and informative. The basic format elements, which can be combined in a variety of ways, can include:

- How the candidates are positioned on stage;
- Roles of moderator(s) and panelists;
- Who asks the candidates questions; and
- The established topics and time limits.

Candidate Staging

There are three basic variations for positioning candidates on stage for a debate:

Box 15: Be Ready for Reactions to Criteria

As evidenced by the following article from Trinidad and Tobago, debate groups can expect complaints from smaller parties not invited to debate after the application of participation criteria.

MSJ wants the Debates Commission to change rules

Trinidad Express Newspaper
October 2, 2013

By Camille Bethel

Political Leader of the Movement for Social Justice (MSJ) David Abdulah believes there is still time for the Trinidad and Tobago Debates Commission to amend its rules to allow the party to be a part of the upcoming local government elections debate.

Speaking on Thursday at a media conference at Communication Workers Union Hall, Henry Street, Port of Spain, Abdulah said the current rule set by the Commission will rob the MSJ of the opportunity to participate in the election debates...

Source: <http://www.trinidadexpress.com/news/MSJ-wants-the-Debates--Commission-to-change-rules--226082291.html>

- Standing at podiums;
- Seated in chairs or around a table or desk; and
- Bordered by an audience (for a “town hall” style debate).

Moderators and panelists will also require staging as determined by the way candidates are positioned. (See Box 16: Candidate Staging Options for examples of arrangements used in different countries.)

Moderator and Questioner Options

Debate groups have developed a variety of approaches for moderating and posing questions to candidates during a debate:

Single Moderator

In this approach, one individual both manages the flow of the debate and adherence to the agreed upon rules as well as asks the candidates questions. This arrangement is designed to maximize the amount of time candidates have to speak and facilitate follow-up questions by the moderator. Some debate groups have found it a challenge to identify an individual with the perceived impartiality and journalistic skills to play both roles. In that case, the roles of moderator and questioner may be divided among several individuals.

Panel of Questioners

In this case, several individuals ask the candidates questions. A separate moderator may also take part to manage the overall debate and keep time. This approach can be useful in providing roles for journalists from several print and electronic media outlets, which can help engage the media in the debates. In politically divided countries where journalists may be perceived as having ethnic, regional or political biases, having several panelists of different profiles can increase candidates’ confidence that the debate will be fair.

Citizen Questioners

Also known as a town hall format, in this approach candidates take questions from a live citizen audience. A moderator manages the overall debate and time limits and in some cases may ask initial and follow-up questions.

Citizen Questions via Phone, Internet or Taped

In this instance, questions come from the general public remotely via the Internet or cellphone (e.g., SMS texts, e-mails, YouTube, Twitter, etc.). Video questions from citizens can also be taped in advance and shown at the debate. It is recommended that sponsors screen the questions in advance to ensure they are relevant, civil in tone and not duplicative. (Box 17: New Media and Debates)

Candidate Questions

The debaters pose questions directly to their counterparts.

Topics and Time Limits

Topics

Sponsors can organize debates open to questions on any election issue of concern to voters. Conversely, debates can be focused on specific topics to allow for a more in-depth discussion and to ensure these areas are addressed by the candidates. When dividing debates into different themes, sponsors have taken a variety of approaches ranging from just two topic areas, such as foreign and domestic matters, to more than a dozen issues.

Box 16: Candidate Staging Options

SEATED DEBATE

U.S. 2012



Photo courtesy of Mark Abraham and the Commission on Presidential Debates

Canada 2008



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Ghana 2012



Photo courtesy of Institute of Economic Affairs

STANDING PODIUM DEBATE

Jamaica 2007



Photo courtesy of Jamaica Debates Commission

Kenya 2012



Source: Reuters

TOWNHALL STYLE DEBATE

Serbia 2013



Photo courtesy of Center for Free Elections and Democracy

Colombia 2013



Photo courtesy of Fundación Cívico Social Pro Cartagena

U.S. 2012



Source: Reuters

Opening and Closing Statements

Debates can include statements by the candidates at the outset and conclusion of the forum. These remarks generally range from one to two minutes in length. Although candidates often advocate for both opening and closing remarks, sponsors may want to consider having just one such presentation. This leaves more time for what audiences often regard as more spontaneous and informative questions and answers rather than a pre-packaged campaign-style speech.

Time Limits

The amount of time given candidates for opening and closing statements, questions, answers, discussion and rebuttals can vary depending on the specific format and the number of candidates in a debate. Candidates are commonly allocated 1 to 2 minutes to answer a question. Rebuttals can generally range from 30 seconds to 1 minute. In some countries, a question and answer segment can be followed by an unstructured discussion period of variable length (e.g. 5 to 10 minutes), which requires a skilled moderator to manage. To keep the focus on the candidates rather than the moderators or panelists, the questions posed should be clear and short with a time limit of approximately 30 seconds or less.

Follow-up Questions

Moderators, panelists or town hall audience members can be given the option to ask short follow-up questions to clarify a candidate's answer or to probe his or her positions more deeply.

Debate Length

The duration of a debate depends on a variety of factors, including whether it will be broadcast, the number of candidates and how many debates there will be. One to three hours is a common range. For example, U.S. general election presidential debates are 90 minutes in length. Factors such as the amount of time allocated for questions and answers or whether commercial breaks are included will affect how many topics can be addressed during a debate.

Language

The language chosen for the debate can have strong cultural and political implications. In countries where multiple languages are spoken and politics are affected by regional or ethnic divisions, the language candidates speak can be an important symbolic act and a factor in the campaign. Some candidates may also feel personally disadvantaged by the language picked for the debate, which can affect their willingness to participate. Debate sponsors may wish to discuss and achieve consensus on the language or languages of the debate in negotiations with political parties, candidates and even the media broadcasting the debate.

Box 17: New Media and Debates

Social media present new means of engaging voters and risks for debate sponsors. A "tweet" read on-air during an Irish presidential debate was falsely attributed to one of the candidate's campaigns and led to a question that affected the impact of the debate and the race, and led to a legal investigation.

BAI 'broadly satisfied' with RTE's assessment of Frontline Presidential debate

Irish Examiner
November 22, 2012

The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) has said it was broadly satisfied with RTÉ's assessment of the Frontline Presidential debate, which they last week admitted was responsible for changing the course of the election.

During the programme, an anonymous text wrongly attributed to the Martin McGuinness campaign, was put to candidate Seán Gallagher...

Source: <http://www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/ireland/bai-broadly-satisfied-with-rtes-assessment-of-frontline-presidential-debate-575183.html>

Audience Conduct

If a debate has a live audience, rules on its behavior are essential. Debate sponsors should determine whether the audience will be asked to remain silent or allowed to react audibly to the discussion, including rooting for or against candidates. This decision can affect whether a candidate feels comfortable participating. Audience behavior, particularly if partisan supporters attend, can be mutually agreed upon with candidates and included in a well publicized code of conduct.

Rules and Preparations for Candidates

On Stage Conduct

As part of the debate rules, sponsors in some countries encourage candidates to reach agreement on how they will conduct themselves to maintain the dignity and decorum of the event. Such mutually agreed upon guidelines are designed to promote civility during the debate and can include rules indicating how candidates will address one another and commitments to avoid personal insults, offensive language or other unconstructive and distracting behavior.

On Stage Materials

Other debate guidelines can govern the type of aids or support candidates are permitted to have during the debate. Making the rules public and ensuring debaters have a clear understanding in advance of the debate can help avoid scenarios where candidates accuse their opponents or the sponsor of unfairness. At a minimum, candidates are generally provided with water, pens and a blank pad to jot down notes. In addition, it may be useful to have clear agreement on other types of support, such as whether candidates can:

- Bring prepared notes or other briefing materials on stage;
- Use audiovisual aids such as charts, photos or other types of props;
- Consult with advisors during any breaks.

It is also important to confirm who will remove notes after a debate to ensure a candidate's privacy and avoid having the contents end up in the media.

Preparing the Questions

The questions posed to candidates can come from a range of sources:

Moderator/Panelist

With this approach, the panelists or moderator, who are often journalists, academics or policy experts, develop the questions that they direct to candidates. They may solicit ideas from the general public or issue experts to help develop the queries. In this case, the debate sponsor has no knowledge or control of the specific questions that are asked. This approach can help insulate the debate sponsor from criticisms of alleged bias following debates if candidates are dissatisfied with the questions. (Box 18: Share the Questions or Not?)

Debate Sponsor

The debate organizers can draft questions that are provided to the moderator or panelists to ask at the debate. In some countries, the questions are developed by a working group within the debate sponsoring organization, a process that may include soliciting questions from the public, civic advocacy groups, academics, policy experts or think tanks. Developing the questions gives sponsors greater control of the debate content and the tone of the questions. At the same time, sponsors also assume more responsibility should candidates complain of bias in the questions.

Public Opinion Polling

Survey research can also be used to identify the most pressing concerns of citizens. This information can be used by debate sponsors or panelists to develop questions.

Citizen Questions

As noted above, in some formats the general public can be invited to ask questions in person or they can be submitted via the Internet or taped in advance. During the debate, the questions can be read by the individual or moderator as determined by the format. It is recommended that questions be screened in advance for clarity, decorum and to avoid duplication.

5. Debate Production

Box 18: Share the Questions or Not?

A key decision for a sponsor is who will have knowledge of the questions that will be asked at the debate. Debate organizers have taken a range of approaches that reflects what is appropriate in their societies. This includes approaches where the moderator or the panelists know the questions but the sponsor does not. In other instances, the questions are known by the members of the debate sponsoring group that crafted them. And in some cases, the specific questions are provided to the candidates in advance to help ensure they participate, among other reasons. The decision should be taken carefully. The practice of providing questions may discredit the debate group in the eyes of the public and lead to criticism of giving candidates unfair advantages — the equivalent of giving the answers to an important exam in advance. This practice may also sap debates of spontaneity as candidates may respond to questions with prepared remarks. Some sponsors try to find middle ground by sharing topics with the candidates instead of specific questions.

GETTING STARTED: A DEBATE PRODUCTION TO-DO LIST

Production considerations can affect all aspects of debates. To begin production planning, a debate sponsor may wish to focus on the following tasks:

- Identify a debate venue;
- Choose a production option;
- Consult with media partners when setting debate dates to avoid scheduling conflicts;
- Determine the debate format and staging and its impact on the production needs; and
- Involve the production team in all aspects of debate planning;
- Organize the “handshake.”

One of the benefits of candidate debates is that the forums can be widely broadcast on radio and TV, enabling the organizers to reach a wide audience. Ratings data from a range of countries show that debates can be historic events, often attracting a huge number of viewers or listeners rivaling or exceeding top entertainment or championship sporting events. (Box 19: Global TV Debate Audience)

Production Principles

Debates seek to help voters make some of the most important decisions affecting their daily lives — from choosing their mayor to president or prime minister. Because of the political stakes, the public and participating candidates will scrutinize all aspects of the debate production. It is important that production goes smoothly and avoids missteps that will “become the story” of the debates in the media rather than the content of the discussions. For these reasons, it is recommended to keep several principles in mind when producing the debate broadcast:

A Dignified and Respectful Event

The production values of the debates should reflect the significance of the decisions voters will be making at the ballot box for their local communities or country. As such, the set for the debate should be dignified and avoid the flashy, eye-catching production elements more appropriate for entertainment programs. A non-distracting, decorous backdrop helps keep the audience's focus where it should be — on the candidates. A dignified setting further reassures candidates that they will be seen in a respectful and fair light, which can increase their confidence in the sponsor and encourage their participation.

Box 19: Global TV Debate Audience Data

Country	Type of Debate	Date	Debate Audience
Ghana	Presidential and Vice Presidential	2008	Approximately 70% of viewing audience
Haiti	Presidential (Run-off)	2011	71% of viewing and listening audience
Jamaica	Leaders Debate	2011	66% of population
Paraguay	Presidential	2013	80% of households
Peru	Presidential (Run-off)	2011	52% of viewing audience
United States	Presidential and Vice Presidential	2012	Average of 64 million U.S. viewers

The Debate is for the Public Watching and Listening at Home

If a debate is being broadcast, the viewing or listening audience will be far greater than those attending the event in person. For this reason, the debate should be produced primarily with the home audience in mind. This includes ensuring that the persons attending the debate do not divert the viewing or listening audience from focusing on what the candidates have to say. In many countries, the audience is asked to remain completely silent and may not be seen on camera beyond opening and closing shots.

Simpler is Better

While it may be enticing to add extra technology and production elements — such as exotic camera shots, elaborate backdrops, on-screen information (i.e. audience dial testing, etc.) — these additional features can add to the complexity of the debate production. Nonessential embellishments can also distract the audience's attention from the candidates and consume a producer's time and energy especially in the last days and hours before a debate. Although well-intentioned, additional features such as cellphone text voting (SMS) on the candidates' performance or dial testing, among others, may be perceived as a sign of bias by some candidates and can discourage their participation in debates. (See Box 20: Sample Debate Broadcast Equipment List for basic production gear needed for a debate.)

Expect the Unexpected

Many a debate has been thrown off track by unforeseen, last minute technical problems. (Box 21: Be Prepared for Production Problems) To avoid these potential snags, sponsors should consider having back-up systems in place for all key aspects of the broadcast and a contingency plan to deploy the appropriate equipment. First and foremost, sponsors should set up an independent power supply (i.e., generators) so that the debate can proceed regardless of disruptions in the main power source (i.e., the public power supply sometimes known as "shore power.") Other back up items may include microphones for candidates, cameras, candidate timing clock, IFB earpieces, etc. It is recommended that back-up equipment be pre-positioned so it can be put into use with minimal interruption to the debate broadcast. Moreover, debate preparations can go on until minutes before airtime. As candidates consider their own strategies, it is not uncommon for them to either fail to show up as promised or conversely to appear unannounced for a debate. These last minute changes may require adding or

subtracting podiums and readjusting lighting and backdrops, among other tasks. Debate sponsors may wish to discuss and rehearse these possible scenarios so the production remains as seamless and professional as possible despite the inevitable bumps. (Box 22: Debate Survival Tip)

Create a Debate Production Schedule

As with other television productions, it can be helpful to create a detailed schedule that lists everything that has to be done for a debate right up until going on air. A schedule can lay out the timing, tasks, and responsible individuals to ensure nothing is forgotten. (See Box 23: Excerpt from Debate Day Production Schedule from the Jamaica Debates Commission.)

Choosing a Debate Production Option

In preparing to broadcast a debate, sponsors have a number of production approaches they can take — each with different budget and political considerations. It is important to weigh these tradeoffs in the context of each country and select the best-suited option.

Media Pool

With a “pool” approach, the majority of major television and radio stations work together to produce a single broadcast feed of the debate in collaboration with the debate sponsor. The cost of the production may be assumed collectively by the stations, reducing costs for a debate sponsor. The media pool may in turn provide or sell the broadcast at a reasonable charge to help defray the cost of production to non-participating stations. This approach reduces potential charges of political bias or favoritism since all stations are involved. Similarly, since all stations are engaged and providing support for debates, they are less likely to organize potentially competing events. The pool model can also contribute to making debates a national, historic event since all stations would broadcast the forum simultaneously. This approach is used by the U.S.-based Commission on Presidential Debates for general election debates.

Independent Production Company

Rather than relying on a media outlet partner, debate sponsors can contract with an independent company to produce the debates. This approach gives the sponsor more control of the set design and broadcast but adds the cost of covering all production expenses. It is important to select a production company that is perceived as politically neutral to avoid allegations of political bias that may affect

Box 20: Sample Debate Broadcast Equipment List

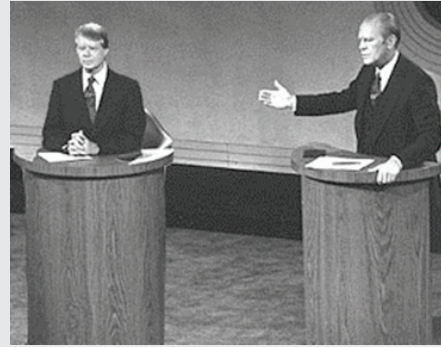
- A full production control room, Outside Broadcast Van (OB unit) or portable production flight pack
 - Vision switcher
 - 3 to 4 professional cameras
 - Video control system (camera shading)
 - 16 channel audio console
 - Limiter/compressor for audio
 - 2 video record devices
 - Video monitors for the control room
 - Accurate clock
 - Microphones for moderator, panelists and candidates
 - Communication system among the stage manager and the camera operators
 - Cabling for all equipment
 - Stage lighting
- Facility with stage area sufficient to accommodate candidates and debate format
 - Air conditioning
 - Power for all equipment (including the stage lighting); frequently a large power generator is required, which should be as quiet as possible
 - Power for the video control equipment (should come from a different transformer from the lighting and air conditioning)
 - Rigging or mounting locations for the stage lighting
- Timing lights or computer digital countdown clocks
- If the debate is going to be broadcast live, then transmission equipment will be needed to send the signal to the distribution point for media outlets

how the debate sponsor is viewed. Although it varies by country, under this model, the debate sponsor may have to pay media outlets for the airtime to broadcast the debate. This approach is used by the Jamaica Debates Commission and the Trinidad and Tobago Debates Commission.¹⁵

Single Media Outlet

Debate sponsors can partner with the major state-owned media outlet and take advantage of the ability to reach a national audience and have production costs covered. The state media can in turn provide the broadcast feed to other stations at no charge. This model has been used in Ghana by the Institute of Economic Affairs and in Serbia by the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (*Centar za Slobodne Izbore I Demokratiju*, CeSID).¹⁶ Ideally, the state broadcaster is seen as a neutral entity. In some countries, however, the state media can be perceived as an arm of the incumbent government, which may have a candidate taking part in the debate. This can cause concerns that the debate broadcast will be biased in favor of the government candidate and make its competitors reluctant to take part. In response, in some cases, debate sponsors opt to show the debate live to mitigate candidate concerns about potential biased editing of the broadcast to benefit one camp. Another factor to consider is that some private stations may see the state entity as competition and reject broadcasting debates and instead air competing programming. This can also be the case if a sponsor selects a single commercial station, rather than the state media outlet, as a production partner since rival media outlets may reject broadcasting debates produced by a day to day competitor.

Box 21: Be Prepared for Production Problems



Ford-Carter Debate 1976¹

The first 1976 U.S. presidential debate between President Gerald Ford and Governor Jimmy Carter in Philadelphia was a landmark encounter. As moderator Edwin Newman of NBC News stated in his introduction, it was “the first between presidential candidates in 16 years and the first ever in which an incumbent president [had] participated.” But it was also remarkable for the technical glitch that stopped the debate in its tracks before closing remarks were made. Over an hour into the debate, the audio feed for the estimated 70 million television viewers — or 54 percent of households — cut out.² And it stayed out for 27 long minutes. For a few moments, there was silence as technicians tried to fix the problem, and then reporters began interviewing representatives of the two campaigns at a different location to fill the time. All the while, though, the candidates stood awkwardly on the stage, waiting quietly behind their respective podiums. They did not talk to one another, and did not sit down for fear of possibly appearing weak to prospective voters, Ford explained to veteran debate moderator Jim Lehrer. “I watched that tape afterward,” Carter recalled, “and it was embarrassing to me that both President Ford and I stood there almost like robots. We didn’t move around, we didn’t walk over and shake hands with each other. We just stood there.”³

¹Photo courtesy of Commission on Presidential Debates; ²Data from Nielsen Media Research; ³Lehrer, Jim. *Tension City: Inside the Presidential Debates*. New York: Random House, 2012. 13-14.

Box 22: Debate Survival Tip

“Whatever happens, don’t lose your sense of humor...”

— Marty Slutsky, executive producer, Commission on Presidential Debates (U.S.)

¹⁵ Jamaica Debates Commission (JDC) www.jamaicadebatescommission.org; Trinidad and Tobago Debates Commission (TTDC) www.ttdc.org.tt.

¹⁶ Center for Free Elections and Democracy (Centar za Slobodne Izbore I Demokratiju, CeSID) www.cesid.org.

Combined Multi-Station “All Star” Team

To help give all interested media outlets a role — and a direct stake in producing the debates — a sponsor can ask the major media outlets to loan staff and equipment to produce the debate as an in-kind contribution. This option has the benefits of reducing production costs for the debate sponsor and encouraging the buy-in of all stations, which reduces the likelihood of a boycott by normally competing media outlets. A further incentive is to include major media reporters as panelists. One challenge is that the ad hoc production team may not have worked together, leading to a potential for production missteps, which can hopefully be avoided by careful planning and coordination. A variation on this approach is to work with several stations and have each broadcast one in a series of debates.

Whatever production approach is taken, it is important to determine who owns the legal rights to the final broadcast. This can affect the potential rebroadcasting of the debates or commercial use of the footage, including for campaign advertising. (Please see Box 10 for other issues to consider in a cooperation agreement with a media production partner.)

Production Elements

In planning for the debate broadcast, a range of tasks should be kept in mind, many of which have practical and budgetary impacts:

Debate Date

As noted, be sure to avoid date conflicts that can reduce viewership such as religious observances or popular sports and entertainment shows.

Venue

In selecting a debate venue with production considerations in mind, the simplest and easiest approach is to hold a debate in a television studio that has all the equipment in place. This is often a good option for a first time debate group. Alternatively, as noted, debates can also be held at other sites, including theaters, hotels or universities with the use of mobile broadcast equipment. (See Box 9 for recommended venue selection criteria.)

Box 23: Excerpt from Debate Day Production Schedule from the Jamaica Debates Commission

Event Day (First Debate)					
Item	Time	Running Clock	Activity	Location	Functional Area
<i>Pre-Production and Preparation</i>					
1	8:00AM	13:00	Jamaica Debates Commission Meeting	CPTC Conference Room	ALL
2	9:00AM	12:00	Producers Meeting	CPTC OC Room	Director, Producer
3	9:30AM	11:30	Security Sweep & Checks	CPTC WB Studio	JDS & Police
4	9:30AM	11:30	Crew Call	CPTC	ALL TECHNICAL
5	10:00AM	11:00	Check & Review Production Elements / Secure & Label Tapes For Recording	CPTC Edit Suite	Director, Producer
6	10:30AM	10:30	Production Meeting with Crew	CPTC WB Studio	Director, Producer
7	11:30AM	09:30	Lighting, Camera & Production Studio Check	CPTC WB Studio	Director, Producer
8	1:00PM	08:00	LUNCHTIME	CPTC Canteen	ALL
<i>Equipment Testing</i>					
9	1:45PM	07:15	Check Timing Equipment	CPTC WB Studio	Timing Team
10	2:30PM	06:30	Micro Wave Link & TV / Radio Station Testing & Press Box / Monitors	CPTC WB Studio	ALL TECHNICAL

Courtesy of Jamaica Debates Commission

Broadcast

Debate sponsors around the globe have produced both live and taped forums depending on the local political environment, their production capacity and available resources. For the tradeoffs of both broadcast approaches, see Box 24: Live or Taped Broadcast?

Stage and Set

The debate stage should accommodate a set that is comfortably sized for the expected number of candidates, moderator(s) and panelists. The height should be sufficient to fit theatrical lighting. The set itself should be dignified, neat, clean, not distracting and convey a sense of national unity. If debates are being held in different parts of the country, two sets may be needed if there is not enough time to transport them between events.

Make-Up

As with most television productions, it is recommended that the candidates, moderators and panelists have basic television style make-up. Make-up artists can be provided by the candidates or the debate sponsor. Candidates should arrive well in advance of the debate to allow time for make-up.

Venue Temperature

It is important to set a temperature that keeps the candidates comfortable and able to perform at their best. Sponsors should avoid unflattering TV images of candidates mopping their brows during the broadcast, which can be interpreted as signs of nervousness by the media or viewing audience. It is advised to focus particularly on the temperature on stage, which may be significantly hotter because of production lighting. If the debate hall is not air-conditioned, portable units can be positioned off-stage to help keep the candidates cool. Audience members will also appreciate a comfortable temperature setting.

Cameras

Ideally, sponsors should have a minimum of three cameras for candidates, panelists and the moderator. Cameras should be placed as close as possible to a head-on position for all the candidates. This positioning enables each candidate to look straight into the camera lens and therefore at the television audience at home. It also ensures that some candidates are not viewed at unflattering angles in comparison with their counterparts. The moderator and panelists should similarly have head-on cameras if possible. (Box 25: Jamaica Debates Commission Camera Diagram)

Audio

Debate sponsors around the world have successfully used a variety of audio systems, including handheld microphones, lavaliers, fixed position and headset microphones for candidates, moderators and panelists. Each type of equipment has trade-offs. In general, lavalier microphones are recommended since they ensure audio will not be lost if a candidate turns away from the microphone. Lavalier microphones also leave a candidate's hands free for gestures. Whatever system is used, however, redundancy is key. Have

Box 24: Live or Taped Broadcast?

Live Debate

- Creates a sense of excitement as the audience is watching or listening to a historic event unfold in real time.
- May eliminate concerns of some candidates that a taped and edited broadcast could be biased.

Taped Debate

- Can make it easier to provide the debate to other stations if a microwave or other transmission system is unavailable.

back-up microphones in place — e.g., candidates can wear two lavalier microphones or be provided with a back-up handheld microphone in case of technical problems. It is also advisable to have spare microphones pre-positioned in case of unexpected malfunctions.

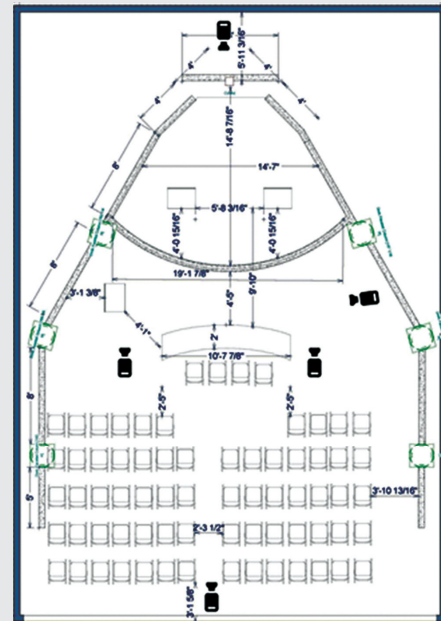
Timekeepers and Timing Systems

Tracking the candidates' speaking time is an essential aspect of ensuring fairness in a debate. Timing mistakes can lead to claims of bias by the debaters that can undercut the sponsor's credibility and the willingness of candidates to take part. Since moderators and panelists will be busy with other aspects of the debate, it is advisable to task others with tracking the time used by candidates and questioners to ensure debate rules are followed. Debate sponsors have developed a range of creative approaches to let candidates and the audience know when time limits have been reached. These approaches include: hand held bells, pre-recorded sounds (from soft chimes to loud buzzers), "traffic lights" (green, amber and red lights), computer-driven countdown clocks, and colored placards (green, yellow and red) that can be held up for candidates and the live audience to see. Silent systems such as placards, traffic lights and countdown clocks have the advantage of enabling the candidates to monitor their time without the viewing or listening audience being distracted with audible reminders. (Box 26: Debate Timing Systems) Timing systems can reduce the likelihood that the moderator will have to intervene and cut off candidates in mid-sentence when their time has expired, which can be perceived negatively or as a sign of bias. Whatever approach is employed, it is helpful to familiarize the candidates with the agreed upon time limits and the timekeeping systems to avoid on-air misunderstandings or mistakes.¹⁷ (Please see below for a discussion of candidate "walk-throughs.")

Professional and Equitable Lighting

The quality of lighting can make a significant difference in how candidates appear on camera and to the debate audience. Uneven or poor lighting can make a debater look bad and open a sponsor up to allegations of bias by the candidates and the media. Care should be taken to provide adequate lighting and ensure the quality is the same for all candidates, moderators and panelists. It is recommended that the overall lighting not be overly dramatic so it does not distract from the candidates. A lighting check during a pre-debate walk through by a candidate (please see below) can provide an opportunity to tailor lighting to the candidates.¹⁸ A lighting director or camera person should be responsible for illuminating the debate set.

**Box 25: Jamaica Debates Commission
Camera Diagram**



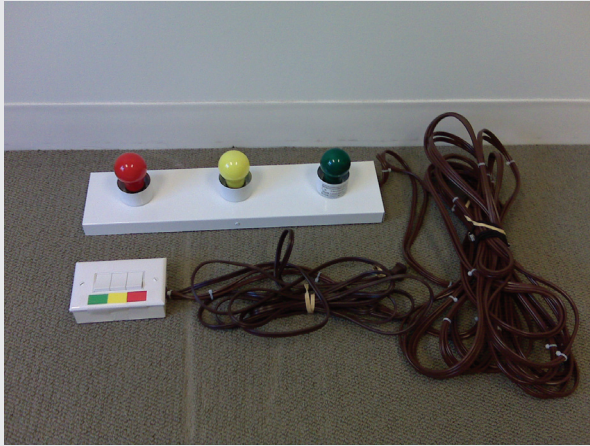
Courtesy of Jamaica Debates Commission

¹⁷ With the author's permission, concepts and text in this section are directly drawn from the Commission on Presidential Debate's *Guide to Hosting Your Own Debate*, CPD ©2012.

¹⁸ With the author's permission, concepts and text in this section are directly drawn from the Commission on Presidential Debate's *Guide to Hosting Your Own Debate*, CPD ©2012.

Box 26: Debate Timing Systems

Basic “traffic light” style timing light constructed from a standard off the shelf light fixture and switch



A traffic light system at 2005 Liberian Senate debates



Combination traffic light and computer-operated countdown clock from 2012 Serbian parliamentary debates



Timing placards from 2011 Liberian Senate debate



Projected timing clock at 2013 Colombian governor debate



Red and green placards from 2010 Iraqi provincial debate



Audience

As noted on pages 19 and 29, having a live audience has many implications for debate preparations. On the production side, the additional persons at the venue can change the room temperature and generate noise during the broadcast. Sponsors may wish to use carpeting, drapes or other noise reduction materials to reduce ambient sound as well as have a moderator caution audience members as part of his or her opening remarks to be respectful and maintain decorum.

Translation

It may be necessary to provide translation as part of the debate broadcast or even for the candidates themselves. These arrangements should be part of the production planning process and may require additional audio equipment for the candidates, moderators, panelists and the broadcast. Some debate sponsors have also opted to include sign-language translation during the debates as a box that appears on screen, which may require an additional camera to film the interpreter and a digital video effects device to merge into the broadcast feed.

Candidate and Staff Walk-through

To help put the candidates at ease and contribute a polished debate broadcast, it can be helpful to invite debaters and their staffs to visit the debate venue a day or two before the forum when the set and broadcast equipment are in place. These visits — generally private one-on-one tours for each candidate or open time periods for multiple candidates — allow them to go on set and get comfortable with production arrangements such as testing the audio, learning which camera to look into and seeing where their holding room is located as well as where to enter and depart the debate hall. (Box 27: Importance of a Production Briefing for a Candidate) The tour can also provide an opportunity to review the debate format, including time limits for questions and answers and timekeeping systems, which can avoid confusion or missteps during the debates that can lead to candidate complaints. The visits are private working sessions and should be closed to media to allow the candidate to focus on his or her debate preparations and ask candid questions without risk of embarrassment.

Organize “the Handshake”

One of the most important aspects of a debate is to show that despite their differences political opponents can discuss issues in a constructive, respectful manner. In this regard, the simple but symbolic act of candidates publicly shaking hands at the start and conclusion of a debate can have a powerful impact. The gesture sends a message of comity and national unity to all citizens, particularly in countries emerging from conflict or non-democratic rule (Box 28: The Importance of the Candidate “Handshake”) The “handshake” also often becomes the lasting public image of a debate. In addition, candidates in some countries have taken the opportunity of the closing handshake to jointly urge the

Box 27: Importance of a Production Briefing for a Candidate

Camera gaze causes WA leader debate stir

Angie Raphael
February 20, 2013

WESTERN Australia’s only leaders’ debate ahead of the March 9 election was so unsurprising that the most controversial aspect was why Premier Colin Barnett did not look down the barrel of the camera.

The Premier caused Twitter frenzy on Tuesday night with many wondering why he was avoiding looking at the camera while opposition leader Mark McGowan stared down viewers. Mr. Barnett defended his decision not to look at the camera, saying he did not give it any thought...

Source: <http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/breaking-news/camera-gaze-causes-wa-leader-debate-stir/story-e6freono-1226582040493>

public to refrain from violence and participate peacefully in elections. To ensure this moment happens, debate sponsors can take proactive steps. These include working out the handshake in advance with the production team and debaters and making the staging part of the walk-through briefing for the candidates (See page 38.) These preparations, which should include logistical arrangements for still photographers, can help make certain the handshake goes smoothly and is captured by the print and electronic media.

6. Moderator and Panelist Selection and Preparation

Selecting Moderators

Like the candidates, the role of moderators and panelists are central to the success of a debate. Moderators manage the debate and ensure that the candidates follow the mutually agreed upon rules, especially time limits. Panelists, who are often journalists, ask questions of the candidates. Depending on the format of the debate, these roles can be separate or combined.

In selecting a moderator, several criteria are recommended:¹⁹

- Politically Neutral – The moderator should be someone seen as impartial by the public and the candidates to avoid any perceptions of bias;
- Knowledgeable of Election Issues – If the debate format has the moderator asking debaters questions, he or she should be well-versed in the candidates’ background and the top campaign issues;
- Profile – While sponsors will likely want to select a known and respected figure to moderate, it is advisable to avoid a media “celebrity” who could potentially compete with the debaters for the attention of the audience and distract from the substance of the debate. (See Box 29: The Role of Moderator) At the same time, the ideal moderator needs to have sufficient stature and experience to manage the conduct of the debate effectively, including holding candidates to the rules in a respectful but firm manner. Including moderators or panelists who provide gender balance over a series of debates can also send a positive message of inclusion; and
- On-Air Expertise – Moderating a debate is often a high stress endeavor. Managing a fast-moving debate while dealing with the pressures of a live radio or television broadcast can be difficult. Selecting moderators with previous on-air experience can help ensure they are able to manage the debate and related production issues, including the use of an IFB earpiece.

Preparations for Moderators and Panelists

In preparing for debates, sponsors may wish to work with panelists and moderators on the following issues:

Know the Debate Rules

The sponsors must be certain that the moderator and panelists are intimately familiar with the debate rules, including the format, time limits and specific terms negotiated with the candidates, such as how candidates will be addressed and the order of speaking. Having well briefed moderators and panelists helps ensure the debate runs smoothly on air and averts possible candidate complaints that the sponsor is biased, which can be used as a rationale to skip future debates.

Develop Concise, Easily Understood Questions

Since the overall goal of the debate is to inform everyday voters, the questions developed by debate sponsors, panelists or citizens should be brief and straightforward. It is important to avoid esoteric questions that may be perceived as serving mainly to showcase a questioner’s knowledge and expertise

¹⁹ Criteria based on discussions at the NDI and CPD sponsored International Debate Best Practices Symposium, Washington, D.C., June 2013.

Box 28: The Importance of the Candidate “Handshake”

East Timor Presidential Debate 2005



Cambodia Communal Debates 2007



Haiti Presidential Debate 2010



Photo courtesy of Public Policy Intervention Group (Groupe d'Intervention en Affaires Publiques, GIAP)

Trinidad and Tobago Local Government Debate 2010



Photo Courtesy of Trinidad and Tobago Debate Commission

Peru Presidential Debate 2011



U.S. Presidential Debate 2012



Photo Courtesy of Mark Abraham and Commission on Presidential Debates

Jamaica Leader Debate 2011



Photo courtesy of the Jamaica Debates Commission

Malawi Presidential Debate 2014



Photo courtesy of Presidential Debate Task Force of Malawi

rather than assist the voter in choosing among candidates. This includes avoiding long preambles that take time away from the candidates. Questions containing multiple parts enable candidates to respond to the portion they prefer. Based on experiences of sponsors in a range of countries, questions of less than 30 seconds are recommended.

Maintain Steadfast Impartiality

As noted, the moderator and panelists need to be scrupulously neutral and evenhanded during a debate. The tone and content of questions and even body language must convey fairness.

Prepare and Coordinate Questions

To help ensure concise, effective questions, many panelists find it helpful to write out questions beforehand. If the debate format involves a number of panelists, it is recommended that they meet privately and discuss the topic areas they wish to cover to avoid duplicative questions. Illustrating questions with statistics or examples can help make them more interesting and impactful. Also, it is recommended that the moderator be prepared with extra questions in the event candidates do not use all of their allotted time, leaving room for more rounds.

Create a Debate “Run Down”

To help manage the debate, a moderator may wish to refer to a minute by minute schedule or “run down” during the forum. This reference document breaks the debate down into its component parts: introduction, questions, answers, rebuttals, discussion and closing statement as well as the time allocated to each segment. The schedule can help the moderator follow the debate format, ensure all candidates are treated equitably and keep the debate to its planned length (see Box 30: Debate Run Down Excerpt from Presidential Debates Task Force of Malawi).

Box 29: The Role of Moderator

“The role of moderator is the most difficult challenge I faced in 54 years as a journalist.”

— Jim Lehrer, 11-time moderator of U.S. general election presidential debates and executive editor at the Public Broadcasting System

“It’s the candidates’ debate – they are running for president; [voters] are not electing a moderator.”

— Bob Schieffer, three-time moderator of U.S. general election presidential debates and chief Washington correspondent for CBS News

Source: Remarks at the NDI and CPD-sponsored International Debates Best Practices Symposium, Washington, D.C., June 2013

Box 30: Debate Run Down Excerpt from Presidential Debates Task Force of Malawi

Total Time	Item	Duration	Speaker	✓
1:00	Moderator’s Opening Comments	1:00	Mod.	
2:00	Introduction of Candidates	1:00	Mod.	
2:15	Question #1	0:15	Mod.	
4:15	Candidate Answer #1	2:00	Cand. 1	
6:15	Candidate Answer #2	2:00	Cand. 2	
8:15	Candidate Answer #3	2:00	Cand. 3	
10:15	Candidate Answer #4	2:00	Cand. 4	
12:15	Candidate Answer #5	2:00	Cand. 5	
14:15	Candidate Answer #6	2:00	Cand. 6	
16:15	Candidate Answer #7	2:00	Cand. 7	
18:15	Follow Up Questions	2:00		

Courtesy of Presidential Debate Task Force of Malawi

Rehearse at the Debate Venue

As with the candidates, providing moderators and panelists with the opportunity to visit the debate venue – to run through the format and become comfortable with the staging, timing systems, microphones and cameras – can boost the quality and professionalism of the debate. In addition, sponsors can also work with moderators and panelists to develop a plan for handling incidents that can occur during a debate. Such scenarios may include:

- A candidate repeatedly violates the agreed upon rules of the debate, such as making personal attacks against an opponent or ignoring time limits;
- An audience member disrupts the debate;
- A candidate does not show up (or arrives unexpectedly) for the debate at the last minute; and
- Production problems occur mid-debate including an audio, camera or power failure.

Prepare Remarks

In opening the debate, a moderator may wish to touch on several key points, including reviewing the format and rules as well as providing instructions to the audience on decorum (i.e. turn off cellphones, no applause or other reactions). At the close, the moderator can thank the candidates and promote the dates, times and locations of upcoming debates (see Box 31: Sample Moderator Script).

Box 31: Sample Moderator Script

[DEBATE OPENING]

[Gwen Ifill] “Good evening from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. I’m Gwen Ifill of “The NewsHour” and “Washington Week” on PBS. Welcome to the first and the only 2008 vice presidential debate between the Republican nominee, Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska, and the Democratic nominee, Joe Biden of Delaware.

The Commission on Presidential Debates is the sponsor of this event and the two remaining presidential debates. Tonight’s discussion will cover a wide range of topics, including domestic and foreign policy matters.

It will be divided roughly into five-minute segments. Each candidate will have 90 seconds to respond to a direct question and then an additional two minutes for rebuttal and follow-up. The order has been determined by a coin toss.

The specific subjects and questions were chosen by me and have not been shared or cleared with anyone on the campaigns or on the commission. The audience here in the hall has promised to remain very polite, no cheers, applause, no untoward outbursts, except right at this minute now, as we welcome Governor Palin and Senator Biden.

[DEBATE CLOSING]

Gwen Ifill: That ends tonight’s debate. We want to thank the folks here at Washington University in St. Louis, and the Commission on Presidential Debates.

There are two more debates to come. Next Tuesday, October 7th, with Tom Brokaw at Belmont University in Nashville, and on October 15th at Hofstra University in New York, with Bob Schieffer.

Thank you, Governor Palin and Senator Biden. Good night, everybody.”

[END]

Courtesy of Commission on Presidential Debates

7. Working with Candidates and Political Parties

The Biggest Debate Hurdle—Getting the Candidates to Participate

Perhaps the greatest universal challenge that sponsors face regardless of country or culture is convincing candidates to take part in debates. (Box 32: Candidates Often Reluctant to Debate) In the U.S., the reluctance of candidates to debate led to a 16-year gap between the landmark Nixon-Kennedy

debates in 1960 and the Ford-Carter forums in 1976. By mitigating factors that candidates use to sidestep a debate and adopting strategies to build public support for debates, sponsors can improve the odds that reluctant debaters will make it onto the stage.

Why Are Candidates Sometimes Reluctant to Take Part in Debates?

Candidates can be resistant to participating in a debate if they believe they have a commanding lead over opponents based on their analysis of the race or polling data. Debates can be seen as a gamble where a potential misstep could jeopardize their advantage. Incumbent candidates may also conclude that appearing side by side on stage elevates lesser known opponents by increasing their credibility and media exposure. Some candidates are disinclined to face opponents perceived as more able debaters, more telegenic or more fluent in the language in which the debate will be conducted. Moreover, debates can become part of the regular volleys between candidates in an election campaign, as they challenge or reject opponents' calls to debate. If debates become perceived as a concession to an opposing camp, candidates may duck out for tactical reasons irrespective of the debates themselves. Moreover, how sponsors handle the many organizational aspects of a forum can be cited as reasons for evading debates. Although many of these factors are beyond the control of sponsors, understanding a candidate's perspective and taking preemptive steps to accommodate where appropriate can increase the chances a candidate will take part. (Box 33: Reasons Candidates Use to Decline to Debate)

Encouraging Candidates to Debate

With few exceptions, most countries lack laws compelling candidates to take part in debates. (See page 51 for debate regulations.) Absent legal requirements, debate organizers can adopt strategies to help encourage candidates to take part. These approaches can include:

Take Advantage of Political Opportunities

Although all elections can potentially provide opportunities to organize debates, races without an incumbent often offer particularly good prospects to go forward with forums and establish a debate tradition. Candidates are often on a more equal footing without the advantages of incumbency. They can also be more open to debates because of the potential media exposure and need to establish themselves with the electorate.

Generate Interest with Candidates, Parties and Opinion-makers

Before a campaign heats up, sponsors may find it helpful to meet with political party leaders and potential candidates to present plans for organizing debates. This respectful outreach can provide an opportunity to explain the benefits of debates (Box 34: Benefits of Debates for Candidates and Political

Box 32: Candidates Often Reluctant to Debate

Kamla: I'm ready

Manning: Nothing to gain

Trinidad and Tobago Newsday
By Cecily Asson and Invera Arjoon

Wednesday, April 28, 2010

WHILE UNC political leader Kamla Persad-Bissessar last night said she is willing to take part in a live national debate with Prime Minister Patrick Manning in the run up to the May 24 general election, Manning, who is the PNM's political leader, was reluctant to participate.

"What do I have to gain, what do I have to gain from doing a debate with Mrs. Persad-Bissessar?"

Nothing to gain, nothing to gain by that. That is all I could say, that is all I could say," Manning told reporters during a walkabout in Tarodale Gardens, Tarouba...

Source: <http://www.newsday.co.tt/news/0,119789.html>

Parties) and begin to establish the profile and professionalism of a debate group. Sponsors can sound out the candidates' views on debates, which can be useful input for a debate plan. Sponsors can also seek out key media figures and respected opinion leaders (e.g., business and religious leaders) to discuss debate plans to gain their public backing, which can be helpful in convincing candidates to take part and generating public support. (Box 35: Generate Support for Debates)

Create Public Expectations for Debates

The main means for encouraging candidates to take part in debates is to create a demand and expectation among the general public and opinion leaders for the forums. To generate this support, debate sponsors can try to build interest as well as a sense of momentum and inevitability around debates. With each passing election and debate, this public expectation can grow until the candidates see skipping debates as too risky and the events become a regular part of elections. (Box 36: Media Holds Candidate Accountable for Missing Debates)

To help create public pressure, a debate sponsor can work with the media to generate a steady stream of news stories and editorials in favor of debates in the weeks and months leading up to the planned events. The different steps in organizing the debates and milestones in negotiations with candidates can also supply an ongoing series of media opportunities, including announcements and interviews on:

- Public opinion surveys showing that citizens support debates. (Box 37: Demonstrating Public Support for Debates);

Box 33: Reasons Candidates Use to Decline to Debate

Stated

- Dates of debates conflict with campaign events;
- Debate formats are deemed to be inappropriate;
- Debate venues, moderators or the media outlet broadcasting the debate are alleged to be biased in favor of other candidates;
- Incumbent candidates at their level of office “do not debate”;
- Debate organizers did not treat the candidate “respectfully”;
- Candidate prefers to dedicate campaign time to rallies or touring and meeting voters one on one;
- Debates are not part of the country’s culture;
- Date of debate conflicts with religious practices; and
- Not all candidates have been invited to debates; or conversely all candidates have been invited to debate.

Unstated

- Candidate is ahead in the race and does not want to risk his or her lead;
- Not confident in his or her ability to debate effectively;
- Unfamiliar with the concept of debates;
- Not comfortable speaking the language to be used for a debate; and
- Does not want to give his or her political adversary credibility by sharing the stage.

Box 34: Benefits of Debates for Candidates and Political Parties

- Provide a unique opportunity to speak directly to voters without filtering by the media;
- Receive unparalleled media coverage that most candidates could not afford or may not have access to;
- Help rally party supporters by seeing their candidate in action;
- Reach more voters via a broadcast debate than they would through months of one on one outreach to voters;
- Connect with independent or undecided voters who are less likely to watch or attend a campaign rally than party faithful;
- Project a positive image of a transparent election and healthy democracy at home and abroad;
- Level the election playing field where one party dominates access to the media;
- Allow parties to showcase emerging leaders, such as women and youth, to revitalize the image of party and show inclusiveness; and
- Allow a candidate to raise his or her personal profile; even if a debater loses the election, the exposure can help with future runs for other and perhaps higher political offices.

Box 35: Generate Support for Debates

Pro-debate editorials can help create public interest and expectation for debates

When politicians are afraid of public debates

Jamaica Observer, Wednesday, October 16, 2013

PUBLIC debates between candidates for political office are a tradition dating back to antiquity. In modern times these debates have become increasingly accessible to the public as communications technology has improved.

Gone are the days when the public would have to be present in the location of the debate to hear the verbal jousting. In the past, the locations for hearing such debates were limited in size, e.g. the public gallery in Parliament.

Debates have many advantages, among them the ability of the audience to instantly compare the opposing views of candidates and to evaluate the contenders when they are live and direct, without the aid of scripts and professional editing.

Public debates have been said to influence public opinion and voting decisions, and therefore politicians take them very seriously. The perception in the public's mind of a win can boost the campaign of an engaging and convincing debater. Conversely, the perceived loser can slip in the polls.

Perversely, a candidate can be seen to win a debate, but not gain, and even lose support...Knowing all the pluses and pitfalls of public debates, candidates who fear that they will not perform convincingly try to avoid those discussions.

Some candidates are better at live public debates than others, and hence the formulation and negotiation of elaborate rules governing these events such as venue, length of debate, types of questions, subjects to be covered, choice of interviewer, and so on.

Given that the rules of engagement can be negotiated in detail, we regard politicians who duck public debates as those who are not confident of their command of public policy issues and unsure of their ability to speak without a text. More often than not, such individuals are easily intimidated.

The question therefore, is how can they expect to carry out the duties of head of government?

We are disappointed with the recent decision in two Caribbean states for leaders not to engage in public political debates. First, that of the Electoral Commission of the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP), in response to Mr. Audley Shaw's stated willingness to engage JLP Leader Mr. Andrew Holness before the JLP leadership election.

Second, Trinidad and Tobago's Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar's refusal to debate leaders of the main political parties in preparation for local government elections scheduled for October 21.

In the case of the JLP, it is either that Mr. Holness fears a public debate, or worse, that the JLP does not think it can withstand the public being aware of its internal differences.

The public, we believe, is entitled to hear and see debates between persons who aspire to lead any democratic country, as that kind of discussion will help voters make informed decisions.

Source: http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/pfversion/When-politicians-are-afraid-of-public-debates_15262556

- Debate initiative launch;
- Sites, dates and locations for debates;
- Formats;
- Topics; and
- Moderators and panelists.

And as debate day gets closer, sponsors can begin to highlight the physical preparations via on-site media briefings to showcase the debate venue or set.

Select a Politically Significant Debate Location

Sponsors may wish to explore selecting a venue or location for the debate with political weight such as locales where candidates are vying for undecided voters, a must-win region, or a place of symbolic importance for historic or cultural reasons. All of these factors can enter into a candidate's calculus on whether to debate.

Hold Debates for Different Levels of Office

If the concept of holding candidate debates is new to a country, it may be easier to start at lower levels of elected office, such as municipal posts. The political stakes are often reduced for parties, and candidates are frequently more apt to participate in debates. Lower level debates can also help establish the sponsor's track record for impartiality and professionally organized events as well as generate public interest and enthusiasm for regular debates. Successful debates further show that the concept is not alien to the culture. Once introduced, the debate sponsor can move up the ladder of political offices to legislators, governors, or president or prime minister.

Box 36: Media Holds Candidate Accountable for Missing Debates

The media can play a central role in encouraging candidates to debate and raising the political cost for those who do not.

Party denies role in candidate's debate no-show

By Sally Brooks, September 2, 2013

The Country Liberals candidate for Lingiari has declined to participate in a debate on Alice Springs local radio tomorrow.

Tina MacFarlane told the ABC it was the party's decision that she not take part in tomorrow morning's debate.

The Country Liberals president Ross Connolly said it wasn't a decision that came from party management, and would have been made by her personal campaign team.

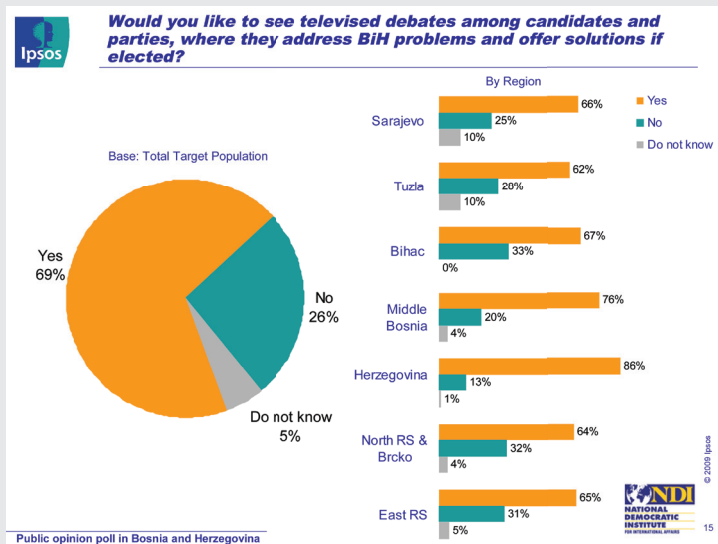
The ABC has been unable to reach Mrs. MacFarlane for comment this morning.

Lingiari candidates from the Australian First Nations Political Party, the Greens and the Labor Party are participating in the debate...

© 2013 ABC News, Australian Broadcasting Corporation
 Link: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-09-02/country-liberals-candidate-not-allowed-to-debate/4929140>

Box 37: Demonstrating Public Support for Debates

In advance of proposed debates in Bosnia in 2010, public opinion surveys contracted by NDI showed strong popular backing for debates-- nearly 70% of citizens polled expressed interest in seeing televised debates. The polling was used to generate media attention, identify the issues of greatest concern to citizens and select the topics discussed at the debates.



Negotiations with Candidates

GETTING STARTED: A CANDIDATE NEGOTIATION TO-DO LIST

- Reach out to political parties early on to express interest in holding debates and get their feedback;
- Develop a basic debate plan but leave room for candidate input;
- Identify the issues where sponsors can be flexible during negotiations and those where they must stand firm;
- Ask the candidates to designate a representative with decision-making authority and get reliable contact information for that person;
- Conduct impartial and transparent negotiations; and
- Use a coin-toss to determine some arrangements fairly.

In developing a plan to work with candidates on debates, sponsors may wish to keep several principles in mind to guide their approach as well as anticipate some common challenges:

Maintain Transparency and Impartiality

Above all, debate sponsors need to be seen as fair and impartial in their dealings with candidates and political parties. Allegations of political bias can be used by candidates as a reason to forgo debates. Once discussions on debate arrangements begin, it is important to provide candidates and their representatives with the same information at the same time.

In this respect, it is recommended that as a general principle sponsors meet to discuss debates only when all candidates or parties are represented. Similarly, any information provided by the debate sponsor should be sent simultaneously to all candidates or parties to ensure transparency. (Box 38: Candidate Negotiation Survival Tip I)

Box 38: Candidate Negotiation Survival Tip I

“No Surprises”

In a competitive campaign environment, candidates and their staff can react negatively to unexpected changes in debate arrangements, often suspecting, fairly or unfairly, an effort to put them at a disadvantage. Transparency and regular communication in the course of organizing the debate are key.

Develop a Debate Plan but Leave Room for Candidate Input

Before discussing debates with the candidates or their representatives, it is recommended to prepare a concise, easily understood initial proposal for the debates. By being proactive in presenting a plan, debate sponsors can demonstrate that they are capable and well organized – qualities that can increase candidates’ confidence that the debates will be professionally done. The plan can also help frame the debates discussion and hopefully help avoid arrangements that can undermine the credibility of the sponsor or make the debate less informative for voters. The plan can include such key elements as: the date, location, time, rules, topics and format. In developing a plan it is also helpful to identify the aspects of the debate that will be determined later by a coin toss such as stage position and who takes the first and last question, among others. (Box 39: Debate Arrangements) The plan should be clearly written and phrased so that it can be provided to candidates, parties and the media without concern. The items left to be negotiated with the candidates can vary from country to country and debate to debate. In some places, candidates have some degree of say over the selection of a moderator and panelists, particularly when a debate group is getting established. However, the long-term goal for the sponsor is to increase control of the debate arrangements incrementally over the course of each passing election cycle. In addition, organizers should think through their negotiating positions to

identify the areas where they can be flexible and those where they should stand firm to protect the integrity of the debate or sponsoring organization. (Box 40: Candidate Negotiation Survival Tip II)

Request a Candidate Representative with Final Say

At the outset of debate discussions with the candidates or political parties, it can be helpful to request that they name a representative who can make decisions on behalf of the candidate. A representative with this authority can help ensure that negotiations advance efficiently without having to pause to vet every decision. It can also be beneficial to have a representative, rather than the actual candidate, take part in negotiations. At times, the natural tensions among the competing candidates can make negotiations even more strained than necessary. It is helpful to have contact information to be able to reach the candidates' representatives at any time to deal with unforeseen issues that come up.

Mark Milestones in the Negotiation Process

In countries where candidate debate negotiations stretch out over weeks or months, some sponsors have candidates' representatives sign letters of agreement as different aspects of debates are settled. With concurrence from the candidates, these agreements can be shared with the public to help further commit the candidates and contribute to a sense of momentum toward debates by providing an opportunity for media coverage.

Plan for all Candidate Contingencies

Sponsors may also want to think through all possible contingencies, including candidates declining in advance to take part or failing to show up the day of the debate. In these scenarios, sponsors are faced with the decision of how to handle the candidate's absence. Depending on the country's legal framework, relations with candidates and the political environment, debate organizers have explored different options for highlighting a candidate's nonappearance. (Box 41: Should a Sponsor Hold an "Empty Podium" Debate? for a discussion of tradeoffs)

Box 39: Debate Arrangements

Frequent Issues to be settled by a coin toss or by consensus with candidates:

- Time of candidate walk-through of debate stage;
- Arrival and departure times of the candidates from the debate hall;
- How candidates will be addressed (titles) by moderator;
- Stage position of each candidate;
- Which candidate makes first opening and closing statement; and
- Which candidate gets the first question and last question.

Box 40: Candidate Negotiation Survival Tip II

Debates as a Campaign Issue — It is not uncommon for debates to become part of the give and take of an election campaign. Candidates frequently challenge opponents to debate in the media to gain political advantage. As the campaign heats up and debates become a media topic, it is important to remain independent and neutral as well as remember that the sponsor's role is to help voters see and hear the candidates. In responding to media inquiries, avoid getting pulled toward one candidate's side of the issue.

Patience is a (Necessary) Virtue in Negotiating Debates — The natural tensions among competing candidates in a fierce election competition can spill over into debate negotiations. All aspects of debates can become contentious given the political stakes involved. Sponsors should be ready for extended negotiations that may be needed to work through any and all issues that may arise.

No Guarantees — Prior to a debate, any manner of issue can arise and affect a candidate's willingness to participate. There are no guarantees until a candidate is on stage and the debate begins. Sponsors should be ready to cope with any and all situations right until airtime, including no-show candidates.

8. Debate Related Voter Education

Debate organizers in a range of countries have developed creative ways to make debates more than a one day event to maximize the ability to inform voters and engage people in the country's election process:

Debate Watch Events

Sponsors can provide organizing materials and encourage civic partners, schools and the general public to hold debate viewing parties. These can be festive social opportunities for people to watch or listen to the debate together in places ranging from someone's home to a community center or an outdoor screening. After the debates, the participants can take part in a facilitated discussion to share their reactions. In countries with rural populations with limited access to electronic media, some debate sponsors have arranged to bring in mobile projectors and screens to show debates in communities that would not normally have access to television. These have proven to be popular, informative events in countries such as Burundi and Haiti. (Box 42: Debate Watch Activities)

Voter Issue Guides

Debate organizers can create materials to help the audience analyze the content of the debate and evaluate whether the candidates addressed the issues that most matter to them. These guides can be printed and distributed in communities, made available for downloading on the sponsor's website or included as a newspaper supplement, among other options.

Social Media

Sponsors can organize social media activities to engage voters, particularly youth. This can include: facilitating Twitter discussions, hosting Google Hangouts where citizens can watch and discuss debates, or even sponsoring YouTube competitions on presentations on election issues.

Box 41: Should a Sponsor Hold an "Empty Podium" Debate?



Photo courtesy of Nigerian Elections Debate Group

Should debate organizers publicly highlight the absence of a candidate who refuses to debate by leaving their podium or chair vacant? Sponsors may wish to consider a range of issues as they decide which approach to take:

- How will the potential media attention of an absent candidate or political party affect the long-term relationship with the sponsor for future elections and debates?
- Are there legal media coverage requirements, such as equal time provisions, which come into play if a candidate drops out affecting whether the sponsor can proceed with the forum regardless?
- Were candidates informed in advance that their absence would be marked by an "empty podium"?
- Should sponsors make a distinction between candidates who formally declined a debate invitation in advance vs. those who agreed but do not show up at the last minute?
- Should a candidate's absence be noted verbally by the moderator at the outset of a debate or highlighted through the event by displaying a vacant podium?
- If several candidates decline, will a large number of empty podiums on stage negatively detract from how the debate looks to the audience?

Box 42: Debate Watch Activities

Burundians watch an outdoor community screening of a 2010 municipal debate.



Community Activities

Debates can serve as a catalyst for a wide range of related cultural and educational activities. Schools hosting U.S. general election presidential debates, such as Hofstra University, have organized more than 100 debate-related activities, including volunteering opportunities, special academic courses, speaker series, voter registration drives, on-line activities and debate watch parties, among others.²⁰

9. Measuring and Evaluating Debate Impact

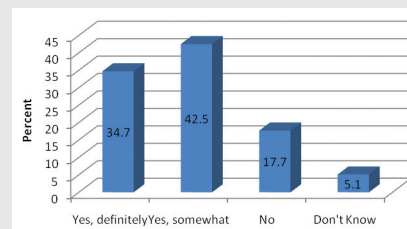
Systematic information on debates can be a useful means to demonstrate their positive impact. Such data can be shared with political and civic leaders, the media, the general public and funders underwriting the debates. Because debates usually are media events, the forums also lend themselves to aspects of quantitative measurement. This includes the ability to ascertain the size of the viewing and listening audiences and the impact of debates on informing a voter's decision-making. Depending on available resources, debate sponsors have used a variety of approaches to capture this information:

- **Public Opinion Surveys** – Sponsors can contract polling for debates that were broadcast on radio and television to quantify the size of the audience and how it compares to other popular broadcasts. Surveys can also assess how people think the debate influenced their knowledge of the candidates and help solicit suggestions for improving future debates. (Box 43: Sample Debate Polling Questions);
- **On Site Audience Surveys** – Conducting exit interviews with a sampling of the audience members to capture their reactions at the debate venue can also provide useful feedback;
- **News Coverage** – Sponsors can measure the number of stories in the print and electronic media to compare the debate's impact with other major news events;
- **Post-Debate Structured Interviews** – Have public opinion researchers discuss debates with candidates and political and civic leaders as well as academics to get their assessment of the impact of the events;
- **In-Home Ratings** – Use independent commercial audience measurement services (e.g., Nielsen-style television ratings) services to collect data on television viewers; and
- **Internet** – Collect viewership numbers for those accessing the debate via the web, especially those tuning into streaming video from abroad.

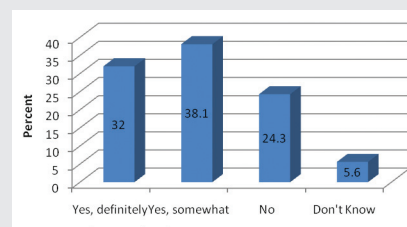
In addition, for countries where Internet access and use of social media is prevalent, a range of approaches, such as Crimson Hexagon, can be used to complement traditional data collection methods outlined above. Although these tools have limitations, such as measuring only Internet users rather

Box 43: Sample Debate Polling Questions

Overall, would you say that these three national debates adequately addressed the issues of importance to you?



Overall, would you say that these three national debates helped you to clarify the position of each party on critical issues?



Source: Post-Debate Poll Report: To assess the impact of the three national debates, December 2011; Boxill Survey Team, January, 2012. Courtesy of Jamaica Debates Commission

²⁰ For more information see <http://www.hofstra.edu/debate/>

than a statistically representative sample of the population, they can provide data from web-based interactions such as live streaming video of debates, Twitter, Facebook or other social media.

10. Between Debate Activities

One of the challenges faced by debate sponsors in building a culture of debate is the period between elections. Debate groups in many countries have explored ways to continue to stage debates to inform the public and solidify their public positioning as effective, impartial sponsors for future elections.

Create a Debate Resource Center

Debate groups can expand the content of their websites, including practical guides to organizing debates and information on past debates, such as news stories, photos, videos and transcripts that can be used by academics, journalists, and good government watchdog groups to hold elected officials accountable.

Hold Post-Election Accountability Debates

Building on debates held during election campaigns, sponsors in several countries have organized forums with elected officials after they have been in office for a period to hold them accountable to their promises. The events use a debate format to bring together elected officials and representatives of opposition parties to discuss their performance to date. Forums held by the Colombian Political Debate Commission of Bolivar (*Comision de Debates Politicos de Bolivar*), the Serbian group, Center For Free Elections and Democracy (*Centar za slobodne izbore i demokratiju*, CeSID) in partnership with RTV television station, and the Guatemalan Managers Association (*Asociación de Gerentes de Guatemala*, AGG) are good examples of these events.²¹

Sponsor Legislative Issue Debates

Debate groups have also helped foster public engagement in ongoing policy debates in national legislatures. At these broadcast forums, elected officials or party leaders are invited to share their positions on issues and bills presently being considered using a debate format.

Organize Youth/Student Debate Programs

To promote a culture of debate, sponsors can also work with schools or youth to organize academic debate competitions. In some cases, sponsors loan podiums from past high level political debates for students to use to help build excitement and tie into candidate debates. The Open Debating Society of Afghanistan Organization, for example, takes part in national and international debate competitions.²²

Convene Post-Election Debate Lessons Symposium

Debate groups can convene political and civic leaders and academics to discuss the impact of debates and offer recommendations for improving debates going forward. These forums also provide an opportunity to present results of research, such as public opinion surveys, that underscore the benefits of debates.

11. Debate Laws and Regulations

Countries have taken a variety of approaches to institutionalizing debates from a legal perspective. These approaches include:

²¹ Comisión de Debates Politicos de Bolivar (www.funcicar.org); Center For Free Elections And Democracy (www.cesid.org); and Guatemalan Managers Association (www.agg.org.gt).

²² The Open Debating Society of Afghanistan Organization (www.odsao.org).

Set Requirements for Debate Organizers

Some countries establish criteria for organizations seeking to sponsor candidate debates. In the U.S., for example, the Federal Election Commission, a government regulatory body, regulates the types of groups that can organize debates (e.g., media outlets or nonprofit groups) and requires that sponsors have pre-published objective criteria for determining the candidates who are invited to debate.

Mandate Debates

In countries such as Mexico and South Korea, election authority regulations mandate that candidate debates take place. Depending on the country, the regulations can set out parameters, including: sponsors, timeframe, format, and the production and dissemination of the debate broadcast. However, while debates are required to be held, candidates are not legally obliged to take part.

Require Candidates to Debate

A law passed in Argentina's Chaco province mandates that debates are organized by election authorities and that candidates take part or face sanctions, such as the loss of public campaign funding. Similar efforts in other countries, such as Uruguay, to mandate debates have been rejected due to resistance from elected officials and concerns about potential violations of freedom of speech protections by compelling candidates to debate.

12. Organizing Multiple Debates

Some debate sponsors may seek to organize multiple series of debates for local, state and legislative offices during an election. This presents additional logistical challenges of pulling together the forums simultaneously or within a compressed timeframe. Hurdles can include identifying multiple venues, preparing moderators and ensuring debates are professionally organized. Lessons on organizing multiple debates from a range of countries include:

- Take an “economy of scale” approach and develop standard formats, materials and trainings for organizers and moderators for all the planned debates;
- Consult with national political party leaders and election authorities to inform them of debate plans and elicit their support in addition to approaching individual candidates;
- Develop uniform written materials that outline the specifics of the debates — including the format and rules as well define the roles of a moderator, among other areas;
- Prepare a standard rules document that candidates may sign before participating; and
- Form a mobile logistics team to assist with debates in each locale to ensure quality control of the arrangements.

13. Debate Alternatives

If debates are not feasible among candidates for political, financial or organizational reasons, sponsors may consider alternative forums. While not always a candidate debate per se, these events can help inform the public while also contributing in the long-term to building a culture of debate:

Debates with Party Leaders or Issue Experts

As an alternative to candidates, debate sponsors can invite a candidate's policy experts to debate specific issues such as housing, health care, economics, etc. Party leaders can similarly be invited to debate the candidate's position on campaign issues.

Candidate Forums

At these events, candidates are invited to present their qualifications, policy platforms and potentially respond to a few questions from the audience or a moderator. In contrast to a debate, there is generally no interaction among candidates — such as direct questions or rebuttals.

Parallel Interviews

In collaboration with a debate sponsor, journalists can conduct a series of taped interviews with candidates where they ask similar, comparable questions. The interviews can then be combined and broadcast together as one program.

14. Going Forward — Debate Resources

NDI is hopeful that the information in this guide is useful to both new and experienced debate sponsors. As organizers move forward with their plans, NDI would like to recommend additional resources, including the Debates International website (www.debatesinternational.org), a global resource for debate updates, news, videos, organizing and production materials as well as research and data on debates. (Box 44: International Debate Support) The experienced members of the Debates International network can also serve as excellent resources on holding debates in a range of political environments and cultures. Information on the network members follows. (Box 45: Debates International Network Members)

Debates International Network

Africa

- Ghana -- Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) (www.ieagh.org)
- Malawi -- Presidential Debate Task Force
- Nigeria -- Nigerian Elections Debate Group (www.nedgonline.org)
- Sierra Leone -- Campaign for Good Governance (www.slccg.org)
- Sierra Leone -- Guild of Newspaper Editors

Asia

- Afghanistan -- Open Debating Society of Afghanistan Organization (ODSAO) (www.odsao.org)

Box 44: International Debate Support

“Debates International is a network of people who go very far in time and mileage to help each other start debates in their own countries...”

— Janet Brown, executive director of the U.S.-based Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD), speaking at the 2012 CPD presidential debate at Hofstra University.

Box 45: Debates International Network Members

Members at the 2013 International Debates Best Practices Symposium in Washington, D.C.



Caribbean

- Guyana -- Merundoi (www.merundoi.org.gy)
- Haiti -- Public Policy Intervention Group (*Groupe d'Intervention en Affaires Publiques, GIAP*) (www.anvannvote.com)
- Jamaica -- Jamaica Debates Commission (JDC) (www.jamaicadebatescommission.org)
- Trinidad and Tobago -- Trinidad and Tobago Debates Commission (TTDC) (www.ttdc.org.tt)

Central and Eastern Europe

- Serbia -- Center for Free Elections and Democracy (*Centar za Slobodne Izbore I Demokratiju, CeSID*) (www.cesid.org)
- Serbia -- Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (*Centar Za Istraživanje, Transparentnost I Odgovornost, CRTA*) (www.crtars)
- Moldova -- Promo-LEX Association (*Asociatia Promo-LEX*) (www.promolex.md)

Latin America

- Argentina -- Center for Implementation of Public Policies for Equity and Growth (*Centro de Implementación de Políticas Públicas para la Equidad y el Crecimiento, CIPPEC*) (www.cippec.org)
- Colombia -- Social Civic Foundation Pro-Cartagena (*Fundación Cívico Social Pro Cartagena, FUNCICAR*) (www.funcicar.org)
- Guatemala -- Association of Guatemalan Managers (*Asociación de Gerentes de Guatemala, AGG*) (www.agg.org.gt)
- Paraguay -- Democracy in Development (*Democracia en Desarrollo, DENDE*) (www.dende.org.py)
- Peru -- Transparency (*Asociación Civil Transparencia, Transparencia*) (www.transparencia.org.pe)

Middle East

- Regional -- *Al Munathara* (www.munathara.com)

North America

- U.S. -- Commission on Presidential Debates (www.debates.org)
- U.S. -- National Democratic Institute (www.ndi.org)