



LEAGUE OF  
WOMEN VOTERS®

MINNESOTA

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Op-Ed on Candidate Forums submitted August 9, 2016 to statewide network of newspapers and journals

Are you looking for an opportunity to hear candidates for office respond directly to voters' questions on issues that matter in your community? For nearly a century, the place to do just that has been the League of Women Voters Minnesota Candidate Forums. LWV does not support or oppose candidates or political parties and conducts its forums to ensure impartiality, equal time and a focus on issues.

In a few select partisan contests in 2016, finding any nonpartisan unbiased candidate forum has become a challenge for voters who just want a chance to ask a question and learn more about the candidates' views. It's like the children's game of hide-and-seek. Today's political version has the candidate hiding behind the podium of a friendly sponsor while most voters are left to seek out facts and policy positions in a forest of outside spending, biased and incendiary advertising and false accusations.

What should voters make of candidates who refuse to participate in a free public League forum but who do participate in an event sponsored by an organization where an admission fee of perhaps \$60 is charged? How unbiased is a forum when that organization also endorses candidates? When an incumbent limits their debate appearances to just one or two events staged by friendly (endorsing) sponsors controlling which questions are asked, this deliberate effort to duck the public and/or media means voters are the real losers.

For state and local races, the League of Women Voters Minnesota's policy is that a forum will be held as scheduled, regardless of whether a candidate chooses to participate. The League will not be held hostage by candidates who want to control our nonpartisan voter education work. But races for Congress are different. Federal Elections Commission rules mandate that two candidates in federal races be on stage together for a debate to occur. If only two candidates are running, and if one refuses to participate, the forum cannot be held. It also prohibits single candidate "appearances" without affording other candidates the same opportunity to speak to the same audience.

Paying for access to candidates is nothing new in American politics. But, voters should know when candidates are ducking public forums in favor of only friendly audiences. How can a voter make an informed choice? What does this "hide and seek" practice say about that same incumbent's willingness to listen to constituents and share their policy views?

No candidate should want to charge voters a fee to hear them address issues that could determine who that voter casts their ballot for on Election Day.

The League of Women Voters urges all candidates to participate in candidate forums and every other event where voters can be educated. An informed electorate makes for a better democracy.