Planning a Virtual Candidate Forum or Legislative Event

Will more candidates attend our event because it is virtual as opposed to in person?
Yes, it is likely that more candidates than usual will participate in a virtual event. Candidates are eager to find ways to connect with voters without in-person interactions and virtual events are often require less of a time commitment to attend.

How long can a Zoom forum go and still be useful?
We would suggest you limit any virtual events to 90 minutes, at the most. That will maximize the viewers' experience by ensuring that you do not stretch their attention span or contribute to "Zoom fatigue."

If we only have 90 minutes, how many candidates should we have attend?
In most cases, you will likely want to limit the number of candidates to 10 or fewer, if possible, in order to allow candidates enough time to give meaningful responses. That might mean hosting multiple events, and grouping candidates by position they are campaigning for or geography.

There are disadvantages to having two events (e.g. no direct engagement between some candidates, your target viewers may not be able to watch multiple events), but the advantages of having time and candidate limits outweigh the drawbacks.

With both early and vote-by-mail options being used so much this year, is September likely the best timing for a virtual event?
Yes, this fall, all registered voters in Vermont will be sent a mail-in ballot automatically – many will be casting their votes early. To accommodate this shift to early voting, we suggest hosting candidate forums in September (as opposed to waiting until October, which has often been done in previous elections).

How many questions should we be prepared to ask?
It depends on how many candidates are attending and how much time they have to respond (you should provide at least 1 ½ minutes per question per candidate). Be sure to budget time for general statements or introductions, if you'd like that to be part of the program.

Should we send the questions out in advance?
Yes, we recommend developing and distributing questions in advance. This will allow candidates to learn more about the issues and prepare responses, so they can offer meaningful answers in the short time they are provided. It also helps organizers set their priority issues and determine how to strategically phrase questions in advance.

If we send questions in advance, can there still be a way for the audience to ask questions?
Yes, organizers can solicit questions from registrants in advance via email or survey or gather live audience feedback (through the chat box or another method). If you determine that there isn't time for audience questions, you should support attendees in connecting with candidates to ask their questions afterwards.

Should we record the event(s) for re-posting?
Yes, if possible, record the event to post on your website or social media. This will allow people who are not able to tune in live to view the forum.

If we are only using prepared questions, why do we need a live audience? How about recording each candidate and then pasting together a longer video?
Even if you're only using prepared questions, having limited live interaction between candidates and attendees can make the experience more engaging. However, if it will be logistically easier for you to request video statements from candidates and edit those into a recorded forum as opposed to organizing a live event, that is an option.

Should the non-candidates attendees "introduce" themselves during the event?
If possible, attendees should introduce themselves in the chat box or verbally. We suggest that they share their name, pronouns, voting town, and interest in attending the forum.

Should we ask people to register in advance for the event?
Yes, this is becoming "best practice" for virtual meetings and allows you to have better planning and preparation. If fewer than five attendees register, prioritize recording the event for future viewing by a wider audience.

How do you do timekeeping by Zoom?
Using time signals (like the "thumbs up" reaction) to indicate when candidates have 30 seconds or no time left to respond can help everyone stay on track.

Can you control the visuals so only the person speaking and the facilitator are on the screen, or to be sure that they stay on everyone's screen/view?
Yes, you can do so by "pinning" or "spotlighting" the facilitator and candidates' video boxes. You can also request that candidates turn on their videos and attendees keep their videos off. If you have questions about how manage these functions, consult your virtual meeting software help center.

Is there any way for a virtual event to replace the informal discussions and follow-ups that take place after an in-person event?
You can't replace the value of in-person interactions, but utilizing breakout rooms for small group discussions or connecting attendees with candidates for future one-on-one meetings can help. A facilitator can work both during and after the event to help make these connections.

If you have questions that aren't answered in this document or would like any other assistance, please contact Alliance Public Engagement Director Charlie Gliserman at charlie@vecaa.org or (802) 595-9913.