

NET Political Debate Guidelines

Revised and approved May 7, 2014

Introduction

Nebraska Educational Telecommunications (NET) regularly presents political news coverage, candidate debates and forums as part of our mission “to educate, challenge, and inspire Nebraska.” The criteria included here help guide our program producers in fulfilling that goal in a manner that best serves the citizens of Nebraska and meets the requirements of state and federal law.

Organization and production of our political news coverage and our special election year programming lies with NET News which creates content distributed via NET Radio, NET Television and NET On-Line. We recognize that our overarching goal must be to help citizens be better informed, so they may choose to be involved in their government, and the political process.

We wish to provide the broadest possible range of ideas, issues, and exposure to candidates, while at the same time providing the most useful and meaningful information.

While NET seeks to include the broadest possible range of ideas and issues, presenting every point of view may sometimes detract from this station’s overarching goal of providing useful and meaningful information to the public.

Legal Obligations

NET will follow all rules and regulations as mandated by the Federal Communications Commission pertaining to political coverage and programming. We also will abide by, and use as references, all rulings on these matters emanating from the Supreme Court of the United States.

Federal law and administrative rules of the FCC establish that broadcasters, including NET, enjoy wide latitude in the exercise of editorial discretion, even in the case of sponsored political debates. The U.S. Supreme Court has held that “...electoral speech may have its most profound and widespread impact when it is disseminated through televised debates.” The Court’s rulings make it clear that a broadcaster has the editorial discretion to invite only some legally qualified candidates to participate in a candidate debate, so long as the decision is based on the broadcaster’s “good-faith news judgment” and on reasonable, pre-established objective criteria.

Selection of Debates

NET’s overarching goal is to inform voters in a responsible manner. Given our limited resources — financial, managerial, technical, and available airtime — we must determine whether hosting political debates for specific contested races would be a worthwhile use of those resources. In most instances NET television and radio programming is driven by our statewide service. As a general rule, NET does not present city or county level debates or candidate forums.

In addition, NET may elect to simulcast or re-broadcast on tape delay debates sponsored and produced by other media organizations in the state. NET alone will decide whether the debate constitutes a newsworthy event, and whether the event meets the organization's own criteria for fairness and technical broadcast quality.

Content of Debates

NET will continue to collaborate with other media organizations and civic institutions on the organization of candidate debates. These are valuable partnerships, and the representatives of these groups, will be important advisors in the development of the format and procedures used in the events. However, NET will have content control and be the sole owner of the broadcast rights of any political debate that NET produces for our broadcasts.

Selection of Candidates.

Since the law and subsequent court rulings provide considerable latitude for broadcasters to decide the format and which candidates should be invited to participate, Nebraska Educational Telecommunications established the following criteria to guide our decision.

Under no circumstances will a decision to include or exclude a candidate be based on the opinions expressed or the political affiliation of the individual. The only absolute requirements are that a candidate must be legally qualified and must be certified by the Nebraska Secretary of State to appear on the ballot for the office being contested in the debate.

The other criteria are designed to objectively determine who constitutes a newsworthy candidate for the office being sought. No one item will require the inclusion or exclusion of any one candidate. The overriding selection is based on the judgment of the professional journalists on staff.

Prior to a planned debate, all legally qualified campaigns may provide evidence of their status as a newsworthy candidate. Among the questions that may be asked of the candidate:

- Does the candidate actively campaign for election to the office across the jurisdiction he or she is seeking to represent? Indicators of an active campaign include:
 - Creating a legal campaign committee regulated under state or federal law.
 - Establishing a campaign headquarters and telephone number staffed by an active staff, paid or volunteer.
 - Articulating views on principle issues affecting the electorate by issuing position papers or through an active, accessible website.
 - Making regular personal campaign appearances across the jurisdiction.
 - Active marketing and/or advertising efforts.
 - Financial resources beyond the candidate's own and/or active fundraising activity
 - Routine and sustained contact with news media in the jurisdiction.
- Does the candidate provide evidence of significant initial voter interest through a sizable volunteer effort, or significant turnouts at campaign stops, broad-based financial support, or substantial news coverage?

- Does the candidate demonstrate factual evidence that would include at least 5% voter preference in an independent poll or receipt of 5% of the total votes cast in the primary election?
- Does the candidate provide evidence of popular support through service in a state or local elected office within the last five years within the candidate's current jurisdiction?
- Is the candidate a representative of a nationally recognized political party, and does the candidate have the financial and logistical backing of that party?

Other Items

These criteria will be reviewed prior to each statewide election cycle to assure they remain relevant, of benefit to the state's citizens, and of practical use to the NET broadcast networks.

When necessary, outside experts in politics, journalism, and the law may be consulted to review both the guidelines and to offer opinions on the manner in which the guidelines were applied in individual debates.

Through its news unit, NET will make every effort to provide information about all candidates on the ballot in major state and federal offices. Outlets might include candidate profiles, providing of additional information on NET campaign news web sites, or finding other creative ways to inform voters of alternative candidates and points of view available during any election cycle.