

Better Debates Kingston

A Guide to Help Meet Voters' Needs

Although municipal government is the most local form of democracy in Canada, municipal elections often see lower voter turnout, less information accessibility, and reduced citizen engagement compared to provincial or federal elections. Without the organized efforts of political parties and concerted national or provincial media coverage, citizens can have a harder time learning about candidates and deciding between options. In this context, a well-run debate can be particularly impactful because they can provide two key outcomes for voters: information *about* the candidates, and *to distinguish between* candidates.

Many small and medium-sized cities will typically not have a formal debate consortium to organize debates, often leaving volunteer groups or advocacy organizations to fill the void. While this is an important social contribution to local democracy, these efforts will not always deliver on the two key outcomes for voters to the extent that a professionally-run leaders' debate might in a provincial or federal election. Where those debates often feature questions posed directly by the moderator or pre-formulated by assigned questioners, local debates instead often rely on a town-hall format that introduces risks of long audience questions/statements that take up a large portion of debate time (taking time away from candidates), questions focusing on personal concerns that are not of interest to other voters, unclear questions, or an imbalance between district-specific and city-wide concerns.

Recognizing the challenge of low engagement in local elections, reforming debates provides an opportunity to improve access to information about candidates. Drawing on lessons learned from the review of federal election debates, this document offers guidance for hosting debates that meet voters' information needs. This framework helps achieve its key information objectives through three key elements:

- 1) Crowdsourcing residents' concerns
- 2) Refining the question set
- 3) Introducing an "information and contrast" model

In order for this model of debate to be successful, it is essential that the organizer(s) and moderator(s) of the debate remain neutral. This includes ensuring that all candidates have equal access to information (whether that means pre-circulating questions to all candidates at the same time or not pre-circulating questions). To ensure candidate and voter trust in the debate, it may be advantageous for the organizer(s) and moderator(s) to remain publicly neutral throughout the entire campaign period.

The rest of the document provides guidance on this new debate model. The primary objective for this debate reform is to more directly meet voters' information needs.

1) Crowdsourcing residents' concerns

Ahead of the debate, a public call should be sent out to crowdsource residents' concerns, including issues that touch on neighbourhood-specific issues as well as city-wide issues. The crowdsourcing process provides a wider range of time for residents to formulate their questions than 'in the moment' discussions, and also provides an opportunity for residents who are unable to attend the debate to submit questions (reducing participation barriers for residents whose care or work obligations may prevent attendance).

This crowdsourcing process should be handled by a trusted and impartial party. The accompanying statement soliciting questions should welcome all contributions, from formal questions to rough suggestions of topics to cover, and also remind submitters that questions may be edited for clarity, concision, and to combine with similar sentiments. Data handling and confidentiality plans should also be included. The following text may be useful:

In order to reflect residents' priorities for this election, debate organizers are collecting questions and priority topic suggestions. All contributions are welcome, although the organizers may slightly edit or combine questions to make sure that the debate covers a wide range of topics. Your confidentiality will be protected, and your name will not be shared during the debate. All submitted questions will be permanently deleted after the debate. Please send questions by email to betterdebateskingston@gmail.com.

2) Refining the question set

The key objective for the process of refining the submitted questions and suggested topics is to produce a question set that asks concise and clear questions of the candidates. Concise questions help to ensure that the maximum amount of debate time is allocated to candidates sharing information, while clear questions minimize the risk of a moderator introducing confusion into the debate. The most frequently-appearing questions or themes in the crowdsourced set should usually be given priority in the development of the question set. The question set is typically kept secret from participants before the debate begins (at the very least, it is imperative that all candidates receive the same access to preparatory information to ensure procedural fairness). Where possible, the moderator should be knowledgeable about the issues of the district. To maintain trust in the debate, the moderator should remain neutral throughout the election period.

3) Introducing an "information and contrast" model

As noted above, a well-run debate helps voters receive two types of information: details about candidates individually and details to distinguish between candidates. As André Blais and Jean-François Daoust argue in [their proposal for federal election debates](#), alternating between individual responses on a theme and one-on-one exchanges offers a balance between providing a platform for direct responses while also allowing candidates to differentiate themselves. Within the context of a municipal debate, the model would look something like this:

Introductory Statements	• Individual response from each candidate, with a pre-set amount of time
Thematic Questions	• Individual response from each candidate to a refined question • One-on-one exchanges between candidates, where one candidate asks another a question and may respond.
Closing Statements	• Individual response from each candidate, with a pre-set amount of time

The total time allocation per theme and design of one-on-one exchanges will vary depending on the number of candidates in the race. Annex B provides a series of models that may be used, only requiring a random assignment of candidates to letters on the day of the debate. Moderators should be prepared to keep candidates on time, especially ensuring that one-on-one responses share time respectfully.

Implementing the Better Debates Kingston Model in Your Debate

- ☐ Using neighbourhood social media groups, email lists, and other accessible media, distribute a call for questions and advertise the debate, including a cutoff 24h before the debate.
- ☐ Candidates should be informed that the debate is following the BDK model. This document can be shared to provide further guidance.
- ☐ After all responses have been received, the moderator (or a small impartial working group) should refine the question set.
- ☐ Immediately before the debate and ideally in the presence of the candidates, a draw should take place to randomly assign candidates to speaker letters.
- ☐ As the debate begins, the format should be explained. "Today's debate will begin with opening statements and then proceed through questions that have been submitted by residents in the district. The speaking order has been selected randomly. Opening statements will last ___ minutes. Responses to moderator-posed questions will last for ___ minutes. The debate will also include direct exchanges between candidates, where one candidate can ask another candidate a question and then exchange on the topic. My role as moderator is to make sure that we follow time allocations and that candidates remain respectful in their exchanges."

In the case of short answers leading to a large amount of leftover time, additional questions from the floor may be solicited (with individual responses only) before closing statements.

Annex

Model for a two-candidate debate (60 minutes)

Introductory Statements (6 minutes)	• Candidate A: 3 minutes • Candidate B: 3 minutes
Theme One	• B / A (1 min each) • A asks B (2 minutes)
Theme Two	• A / B (1 min each) • B asks A (2 minutes)
Theme Three	• B / A (1 min each) • A asks B (2 minutes)
Theme Four	• A / B (1 min each) • B asks A (2 minutes)
Continues, alternating	
Closing Statements (4 minutes)	• Candidate B: 2 minutes • Candidate A: 2 minutes

Model for a three-candidate debate (60 minutes)

Introductory Statements	• Candidate A: 3 minutes • Candidate B: 3 minutes • Candidate C: 3 minutes
Theme One	• B / C / A (1 min each) • A asks C (2 min)
Theme Two	• C / A / B (1 min each) • B asks A (2 min)
Theme Three	• A / C / B (1 min each) • C asks B (2 min)
Theme Four	• B / A / C (1 min each) • C asks A (2 min)
Theme Five	• C / B / A (1 min each) • A asks B (2 min)
Theme Six	• A / B / C (1 min each) • B asks C (2 min)
Theme Seven	• B / A / C (1 min each) • C asks A (2 min)
Closing Statements (3 minutes)	• Candidate C: 1 minute • Candidate B: 1 minute • Candidate A: 1 minute

Model for a four-candidate debate (60 minutes)

Introductory Statements (12 minutes)	• A / B / C / D (3 min each)
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Theme One	• B / D / C / A • C asks A • B asks D
Theme Two	• D / A / B / C • A asks B • D asks C
Theme Three	• C / B / D / A • B asks D • C asks A
Theme Four	• B / D / A / C • A asks C • D asks B
Theme Five	• D / A / C / B • C asks B • D asks A
Theme Six	• A / B / D / C • A asks D • B asks C
Closing Statements (8 min)	• C / D / A / B

Model for a five-candidate debate (60 minutes)

Introductory Statements	• A / B / C / D / E
Theme One	• B / E / D / C / A • A asks E • D asks C
Theme Two	• C / D / A / E / B • B asks A • E asks D
Theme Three	• D / E / A / B / C • A asks B • C asks E
Theme Four	• E / B / C / A / D • B asks C • D asks A
Theme Five	• A / E / B / D / C • E asks D • C asks B
Closing Statements	• C / D / B / E / A

About the Authors

Michael Murphy is Director of the Centre for International and Defence Policy at Queen's University, where he teaches in the School of Policy Studies and the Department of Political Studies. From 2024-2025, he was the Buchanan Postdoctoral Fellow in Canadian Democracy, where his project focused on strengthening local democracy.

Jonathan Rose is Professor and former Department Head in the Department of Political Studies at Queen's University. Jonathan was the Academic lead of two of the country's three sub-national citizens' assemblies on electoral reform. He had the privilege of being the Academic Director of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform and in 2024, the Academic Lead of the Yukon Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform.

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