

Town Hall and Candidate Forums

Getting the most out of town hall meetings and candidate forums

Town hall meetings and candidate forums are both settings where the member of Congress and candidates want to connect with people in the district. When these events are large and structured the opportunity is different than when they are small. Through good planning and by being quick to adapt to the situation, you can take advantage of these opportunities. They are worth planning for with the same care that you plan for a lobby meeting.

Finding town halls and forums

Objectives

Note of caution

General guidelines

Framing your question

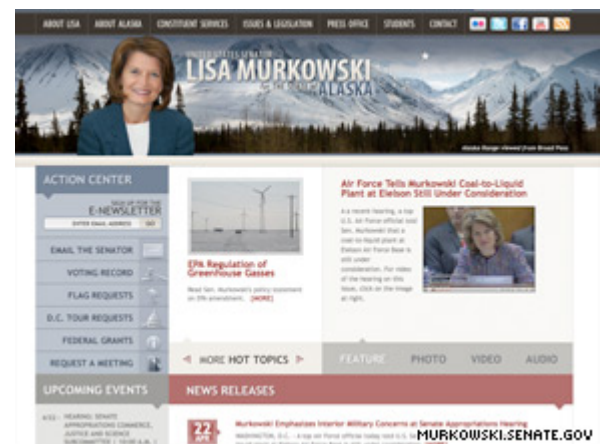
Sample questions

Webinar

Finding out about town halls

The member of Congress or candidate's official website and the candidates' websites are usually the best place to find out when a public event is happening. Facebook is another good source. Sometimes there isn't much advance notice, so check frequently during Congressional recesses and campaign season.

Another way of staying apprised of events is by having a good relationship with your district scheduler. It's another opportunity to build that relationship by checking in with them by phone a week or so before recess to see what they can offer about the recess schedule of the member of Congress and key aides.



Your Objectives May Vary

See [sample questions](#).

Encourage the member of Congress or candidate to take the best possible position on climate change by asking a question that links their strengths and concerns to our issue.

Find out more about the member of Congress or candidate and their priorities/views by asking a more general question on climate change or related issues like energy or national security.

“How do you think we can best transition to a clean-energy economy?”

Educate the member of Congress or candidate and others who are present by asking a question that has a key fact embedded within it.

“Thank you for taking my question. The Pentagon reports that climate change is creating the conditions that destabilize governments around the world, leading to an increased risk of U.S. troops being sent abroad. Would you comment on this?”

Create the impression, by not identifying as CCL, that the public as represented in the audience cares about climate change. (This doesn't work if you are already personally known to the officials.)

“A majority of Americans, on both sides of the political spectrum, believe Congress should be taking steps to deal with the threat of a warming world. What emissions reducing plan do you support?”

Create a positive impression of CCL's organizing ability by identifying as CCL.

Establish rapport and build a relationship with the member of Congress, candidate or accompanying staff by mingling informally during transition times before and after the event. Come early, stay late, and see if you can just happen to position yourself where the member of Congress or candidate is going to be.



When turnout is low, sometimes a discussion can take place. If you can get a productive conversation started, you've turned this event almost into a lobby meeting. If things are going very well, consider asking if you can meet again to continue the discussion.

Note of Caution

Although these meetings can offer opportunities to move things forward, there are also situations in which the meeting can be counterproductive. We want to avoid saying something that provokes a negative response from the crowd because that could discourage a congressman or candidate from taking leadership on climate change. We want to avoid backing the member of Congress or candidate into a corner and creating a defensive reaction. Our goal is engagement, not confrontation. If that's not possible, then attending and speaking at these events may not be a useful strategy.

Approach these events with the same kind research and diligence you would apply to a private meeting with a member of Congress. What are the concerns of the member of Congress or candidate and their constituents? What kind of language and messaging will resonate with the audience in your district? There is no single question that is suitable for every group; no "one size fits all." Your group must come up with the objectives, questions, and messages that are suitable for your situation.

General Guidelines

You can increase your chance of getting to ask a question if you dress nicely, sit up front, smile, and look pleasant. Sometimes these meetings bring out members of the community who are strident or difficult, and you can be a breath of fresh air simply by being pleasant and engaging. If there is a microphone in the aisle for participants, sit near it. Prepare your questions in advance so you can frame it in a way that gives them the best chance to give a strong answer.

Framing Your Question

- A good question includes an appreciation at the beginning and the end, and offers some useful talking points for the speaker to pick up on.

- It may be tempting to try to embarrass some candidates, but this will be less productive than helping them find talking points that lead to solutions and plays well with the voters.
- Avoid speeches disguised as questions—keep it brief and focused on one aspect. For example:

“Thank you for being the kind of people who want to be a public servant. An important issue facing us is our energy situation. We need to cut our carbon emissions so we don’t leave big problems for my kids and grand kids to handle. I don’t think regulations are going to be as effective or as quick as a market-based solution. What can you do in Congress to help the United States be a leader in the transition to clean energy? I look forward to your leadership in solving this problem.”

Advance research is helpful in developing your questions. Link your question to something that resonates with the member of Congress or candidate. For instance, if your research shows that employment is a key issue, frame your question around jobs:

“I heard a report that said a revenue-neutral fee on carbon pollution could create over 2 million jobs, and it was exciting to realize that we could do something about carbon pollution that is good for the economy. If this carbon fee really helps the economy and helps keep global warming in check, would you support it?”

If your research shows that national security is a priority, then reference a military official in your question. If air quality is bad and asthma is a problem, reference the health benefits of clean energy.

Avoid accusatory questions, such as anything that starts with “Why didn’t you...” or “I was disappointed that...” We want to lead them to a better position, and we are unlikely to reach their hearts with negative questions.

Also, avoid prefacing questions with long statements of how desperate the situation on climate is because people mostly tune this out unless there is also a strong message attached to it that points to a solution. When inserting information on climate change, references to local experts from your

local university are better than more distant experts, and references to specific local climate impacts are better than faraway ones.

Sample Question

1. Former secretary of state George Shultz who has served four Republican administrations including Reagan and Bush Sr. believes that a market-based solution is the best way to deal with global warming. He believes we should have a straightforward, simple fee on carbon emissions and send all the revenue back to households in a monthly check. Are you familiar with Mr. Shultz's solution, and do you believe that this market-based approach is the best way to respond?

2. At the University of (your state) we have some of the best scientists in the country. Their position matches that of 97% of climate scientists around the world that global warming is tied directly to the burning of fossil fuels. What's your preferred approach to solving climate change?

3. There are 7 billion people on the planet today. Most people want our standard of living. We cannot begrudge them that. However, with 7 billion people using fossil fuels, we won't be able to keep our air clean and our water pure. We will have to make a larger place at the table for renewable energy. How do we do that, in a timely way and in respect of the fact that U.S. businesses need predictability for their pricing?

4. I've heard talk about a carbon fee/tax. On one hand, it makes sense that if you want less of something, like pollution, you should tax it. On the other hand, I don't want the size of government to grow. If we wind up with a Carbon Tax, would you please see to it that Congress returns that money to American households in the form of a monthly rebate?

Webinar

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